

THE BUCKET

AND OTHER WEIRD STORIES

by Isaiah J. King

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For anyone who entered the sixth kingdom.

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THE BIG MAN HIMSELF

LIAM WAS ANXIOUS. He and his mom had been in this mall for over two hours, and they still had not seen Santa Claus. He glared at his mom as she hurled arguments regarding the price of a cake mixer at the sales rep. Liam stood bored just like this in at least ten stores today. At least in the bookstore he convinced his mom to buy him that flashlight. His friend Tabitha had shown him how to make all sorts of shadow puppets with hers last week, and Liam really wanted to try some of them out. She could make a dog, a bunny and even a beetle! The way she could paint the darkened walls of her room with shadow enchanted him. He absentmindedly fumbled with the flashlight in his pocket as he waited.

His mom, still deep in the throes of some argument about prices and mixers, didn't notice Liam's growing restlessness. The heavily tinsel clock in the middle of the store read a quarter 'til 5. Santa would not wait much longer.

"Mom," Liam pulled at his mother's shirttail. "Mom come on! We're gonna miss Santa!"

"One minute, honey," his mother said. "We'll see Santa as soon as this idiot accepts my coupons!" She resumed her polite discourse with the cashier and Liam watched the minute hand on the clock turn. Santa was so close he could almost smell the cookies as they crumbled off his beard. His mother, who had yet to break angry eye contact with the clerk, was distracted; this would be his only chance. Without a second thought, Liam sprinted out of the store. The clap of his tennis shoes against the hard tile floor sounded like the percussion of a Roman Triumph. As he clambered around the corner, unshackled from his mother's tyrannical gaze, he spotted the escalator and knew success was only a moving stairwell away. The goal close in sight, he slowed down, so as not to draw the attention of the guards who patrolled these realms. Liam knew they hungered to take away what was his: his God-given right to sit on Santa's lap.

The escalator heaved skyward and like the sunrise burns over the horizon, Santa's fiery red hat crept over the dirty tile as Liam drew closer to the top. He could just make out the peaks of the synthetic snowbanks that adorned Santa's throne room. The higher the escalator brought him, the more Liam felt the pull of excitement in his stomach. He was close enough to see the ornate jewels the mall had gifted to Santa, and the hanging wreaths of perfume-bearing boughs dripping with berries, doused in chemical snow. It was magnificent. Once Santa was in view, Liam hurried off the escalator to assume his position in line. Not too fast—he didn't want the jolly old elf to think him too eager—but his feet seemed to glide across the ground all the same.

He assumed his place behind a mother and her son. Clearly this mother knew how to get her son on the nice list. The child and his mother ran through lines; they would only get one shot at this.

"Hello Stefan, what do you want for Christmas?" the mother said. Her voice was stiff, as if she hadn't had a lot of experience with Santa Claus roleplay.

In the same canned manner the child responded, "Santa Claus! So good to meet you! For this Christmas, I was hoping for a toy car. I like toy cars because when I am older, I want to drive a real car. Do you have a real car?" He continued to blubber short, jolted sentences,

but Liam stopped listening. These amateurs had no clue how to properly schmooze Kringle.

Liam himself had been practicing his approach since September. He planned to start by asking Santa what *he* wanted for Christmas. As far as Liam knew, this had never been done. He was sure his postmodern meta-Santa paradigm shift would be more than enough to make up for all of his sins committed since last Christmas.

One of Santa's boy-servants, an elf by the name of Jericho if his nametag was to be believed, called for the line's attention.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said, in a decidedly not jolly tone. "I'm sorry, but Santa has to go back to the North Pole now. He's had a very long journey and is exhausted from his flight, but he will be sure to read any letters you send his way. He personally asked me to wish you all a very merry Christmas." This last part he read off of an index card. The crowd issued a panicked murmur. Stefan began to cry, only to be slapped in the back of the head by his mother. There was a shuffle of feet as families cleared out, but Liam could do nothing but stand in stunned silence.

The crowd flowed around him, pushing him toward a bench where he sat, dejected. Across the hall, mocking him, stood the vacant Christmas throne—a merry, Christmas obelisk cutting a maroon square into the otherwise desaturated mall decor. Elves began to rip holly from the various fixtures and throw Santa's special decorations into a large black trash bag. Liam continued to watch as mean-spirited elves—whom he suspected were actually pixies or even gnomes—laughed and jeered. At least someone was having a merry Christmas.

But like a sliver of light shining through a keyhole to illuminate Liam's miserly soul, a baritone laugh thundered through the upper level of the mall. Only one man could produce such a guttural guffaw. Liam's head followed the noise to its maker, and he watched as elevator doors slid shut. They entombed a bouncing red belly. Without a conscious thought, Liam sprung like a lion and laid chase upon his prey. Santa Claus descended the elevator as Liam pounded the stairs in hot pursuit. What exactly he would do if he caught him, Liam wasn't sure. Maybe he could catch a ride on his

sleigh! He had only ever seen one elf in the wild, but he was pretty sure it was just a festive midget.

The mall-Santa meandered off the elevator with slow, heavy steps and made his way to a hallway between the DMV and a movie store. The DMV had no Christmas spirit whatsoever—just a spiritless gray cube. The video store was similarly spartan. It did, however, have one interesting item of decor: a curious sign reading “21+ Only!”. Liam pondered the meaning of this as he rounded the corner of the hallway. By the time it was in view, and Liam imagined he was close enough to corner Santa, all could see was a heavy, metal door swinging shut. He leapt to hold it. He had waited too long to see Santa for some rusting, industrial blast door to stop him. He soared through the air like a swan and slapped against the cool tile floor. The rough metal of the door was firmly in his grasp. From behind the door, there was the hum of a generator, and the smell of a basement. This was the moment of truth. He entered.

The door led to an industrial looking room, every wall framed with pipes and dials. Terrible moans shuttered through the vermicular walls, punctuated only by the drip of fluids unknown that echoed through the hall and the tap-dance of cockroaches scuttling away from unheeding feet. Why would Santa come here?

“Ho! Ho! Ho!” a deep voice echoed through the tunnel. Maybe it was Santa—maybe. Liam traversed deeper and deeper into the boiler room’s hold. At the end of the tunnel, illuminated by what seemed like candlelight, a portly shadow danced on the rusty walls.

“My liege,” the shadow said, “I come with excellent news.”

“Splendid!” said another voice. Liam could understand this second voice, but he could have sworn it didn’t use any words. It sounded like the vocalizations of a plastic bin rattled with a fork.

“Tabitha has been very good; Stefan has been moderately good-”

“Wait”, the percussive plastic voice said, cutting off Kringle. “I sense... I sense another presence with us.”

Liam’s breath caught in his throat. He crept back into the shadows.

"Yes," said the mall-Santa. "That is the best news of all! LIAM," he bellowed, with a booming baritone that knocked rust off of the pipes. "Come here".

Liam froze. He held his breath and stood still. He didn't blink.

"You know I can see you when your sleeping! I know when you're awake!" A geriatric head popped around the corner. The mall-Santa's eyes were bloodshot, as red as his suit. Crumbs fell from his beard like sugary dandruff. "And I know when I'm being followed."

Liam couldn't speak. His throat felt like it had closed up. Air refused to pass through. Santa Claus beckoned him closer.

"Liam, you are a very special little boy. Which is why Santa wants you to be his new helper." As he said this, he led Liam back into the candle lit room.

The room looked similar to the others; however, it lacked a wall at the far end. Instead, there appeared to be a porthole of sorts leading down to an infinitely deep chasm. From the depths a pleased clicking sound erupted.

"Yes! Yes! He will be perfect!" it buzzed.

"Now, I know this all must seem scary to you," the mall-Santa said. He placed a gloved hand on Liam's shoulder, "but I think you'd be perfect for a position among the elves!"

For a while, Liam stood frozen, and the gloved hand gripped tighter. His throat felt like it was closing up, and the dripping from the leaking pipes echoed louder and louder.

"What's in the pit?" Liam finally managed. The mall-Santa laughed.

"Why Santa Claus of course! Do you want to go see him? I understand you've been preparing for this day for quite some time!" His eyes twinkled, or maybe they filled with tears.

"What do you mean Santa's in the pit? I thought you were Santa!" The thing in the pit shifted. It sounded like fingernails being scraped on rocks.

"Oh no, I'm just one of his special helpers!" the mall-Santa walked with Liam closer to the edge. "Santa is the watcher, and he tells us of the world's ills. We enact justice upon those Santa sees fit. He is our eyes, and we are his hands." He glared at Liam and smiled

through crooked teeth. His right eye twinkled and rivers of snot flowed like icicles into his matted beard. Liam thought he whispered, "I'm sorry," but before he even processed the thought, the mall-Santa pushed him hard and he tumbled into the pit.

He fell for a long time, longer than seemed possible for a room under the mall. Air blew back his hair, and tiny grains of dust stuck to his skin. The grit of the air crunched between his teeth. The wind tore into him. He closed his eyes and prepared for death, and then he stopped falling. He slid down a moist, dirty mud bank before he came to a gentle stop. Beneath him was something soft. It felt like he had landed in a pile of rice. It was cold, wet, and clung to his bare skin.

From the impenetrable darkness, the clicking voice boomed. "Hello Liam. It's not often I get new helpers."

Liam shrank back. "What are you?"

"Why, I'm Santa Claus, of course!"

A firefly twinkled in the cavern, illuminating the shiny, hulking brown entity. The light drained away before Liam could get a good look.

"All I need from you, my child, is to accept my offer."

Liam found his flashlight and flicked it on. Under the dim 40-Watt bulb, Santa's shell glittered like polished jasper and filled his vision. He couldn't tell where he ended or began. What appeared to be the thorax of a great brown beetle towered over him. From somewhere high in the vaulted cavern, one after another, two long, thin appendages dropped down and slunk toward Liam. Santa swept the floor with its sinewy antennae until one coiled around Liam's leg.

"You smell like such a good boy." Santa unwound his hairy feeler and pulled it back. It felt like a snake as it unwound and slithered away. "I have watched the world for such a long time, but only since I created your kind that I could truly understand it"

Liam was dumbfounded, unsure if this was a dream, or if he was simply going insane. He looked at his surroundings for the first time and realized the soft structure that saved his life was an enormous pillow of ants. The formican formation churned beneath his feet on the muddy cavern floor. Behind him was a wall, teeming with

still more insect life, and in front of him was the pit, in which stood Santa Claus: the towering brown insect that lives in the center of the world. The air smelled like sulfur.

"Of course, if you choose not to serve me, you can never leave this place," the giant thing said. The ants at Liam's feet became more aggressive. Churning in an ever-faster vortex until Liam answered.

"I just want to go home!" he sobbed.

"All you have to do is promise me you will give this gift to your mother." A festive box complete with a crimson bow tied around gleaming silver wrapping paper seemed to float upon a brood of carpenter ants as they emerged from a nearby enclave.

"She has been a very good girl this year and things haven't been going her way. She deserves something special."

Liam took the box, despite the uncomfortable feeling of six-hundred little feet crawling on his hands. "How will I get home?" he asked.

"Just leave that to me!"

Santa clicked and whirred. He buzzed and a beautiful song that no human mind could ever comprehend was conjured into existence. In future years, try as he may, Liam could never quite remember how it went. In the cave, Santa's melody spilled from his mandibles, dripping and sweet like honey; Liam wept. He saw his entire life, and the result of every choice he could ever make. He realized death is an illusion and life is infinite. He could see the melody as Santa sung it. It was a beautiful, multi-dimensional fractal—a snowflake of the abyss. In the time it took Santa to sing one note, Liam grew to the mental age of one-hundred and forty-seven, died and was reincarnated as himself. His nose began to bleed.

The song caused the muddy earth under his feet to breathe and hundreds of millipedes scrambled from the loose loam. They crawled up his legs and situated themselves upon his bare arms. Liam shuttered, but allowed the creatures to wind themselves around his neck and shoulders forming a diplopodian harness. He placed his full trust in Santa Claus. The millipedes attempted to fill his mouth, ears and eyes but Santa sang louder, and they ceased, for they always follow the bidding of Santa. The cavern walls shook. Great clumps of

dirt fell from the impossibly high ceiling, and the million-legged rope hoisted Liam back to the world.

He was roused awake with his head laying on the black tile floor outside the DMV. A security guard gave him a concerned prod. Liam's mud-covered hand tightly gripped a pristine plastic bag that held the silver present. An ant crawled across his forearm.

"Are you okay, kid?" the security guard asked. "You took quite a fall."

"Yeah," Liam said, "I think so." He brushed some dried dirt off of his arm. "Can you help me find my mom?"

~#~

On Christmas morning, the tree looked even greener, the lights burned even brighter, and Liam's presents looked bigger than ever before. Christmas sure is the best time of year. As the family crowded around the tree, sweeps of snow lightly rapped on the window, fire crackled, and paper crinkled. Everyone had something to open. Liam was proud. His mom's gift was from Santa Claus himself! He watched his mother open it and beamed. Liam was so proud he could be a good helper for Santa. His mother's face lit up when she opened a brand-new cake mixer! Santa has a plan for all of us.

Overall, it was shaping up to be a pretty fantastic Christmas. Liam had gotten some new trading cards, a fun board game and, his big present: a new bike! He and his mother were just about to go have their Christmas pancakes (an old family tradition), when his mom noticed a little something extra under the tree.

"It looks like you forgot your last gift!" his mom said. Though she was puzzled; always scatterbrained, she must have forgot she bought this one. Liam grabbed the present with great gusto. It was silver and wrapped with a crimson bow. A wry smile creased his face, this one was straight from the big man himself. His mother screamed, but Liam just laughed and laughed when he opened the box. Inside was a pile of pulsating white mealworms. The little white gnocchi

creatures filled the room with the pungent smell of decay. Thousands of larvae writhed inside the box and the moist sound of grub bodies rubbing filled the air with song.

“It’s a Christmas miracle!” Liam said and filled his mouth with a fistful of mealworms. Not bad, he thought. Not bad. “No pancakes for me, Mom”, he said between chews, “I’m full!”

MY DAY WITH BILL CLINTON

Disclaimer: This is about a totally different Bill Clinton than former president Bill Clinton. Any characters' resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

WHEN I ENTERED MR. CLINTON'S ARKANSAS MANSION, he zoomed through the dull pleasantries and immediately said he wanted to show me something. Something of the utmost importance.

"I'm just here for our interview Mr.- "

"Listen, Ike", Bill interrupted, assigning me a nickname I would continue to bear throughout the day, "I'm kind of a big fuckin' deal, so you're just gonna have to cool your god damn jets".

I couldn't argue. This was perhaps the biggest interview of my career, so I followed without protest.

The floors we were walking on were as ornate as the decor of the building. The black and white checkered marble tiling gave way to a gorgeous stucco wall covered in fine paintings and tapestries. The hallway alone looked like something out of Caligula's palace. To be fair, the scores of nude women who reclined on the expensive looking furniture may have skewed my perception. Adorned upon the walls— which were already dripping with ivy wreaths and Ionian

columns chiseled from the finest, whitest marble—was painting after painting.

"This one's a Rothko," he said, noticing my preoccupation. He chuckled to himself as if he had just told me an extremely clever joke. "I've got a few more in my closet upstairs. C'mon, Hoss. We're going that way anyhow."

We made our way to his room, and he kept pointing out vases and paintings. Saying they were from "the golden age of vasedom", and "the neo-post-classical era of pastel". I think he just made up terms to impress me.

After what seemed like a two-hour tour of the portrait gallery led by someone who just started their art history elective, we finally arrived at a set of doors. I'm not sure why it struck me the way it did that the doors were so tall, but nevertheless I found myself almost impressed for the first time. Bill must have seen this in my face, because he began prattling on about how they were aged oak doors.

"The same kind they use for wine barrels."

He neglected to mention the "KEEP OUT" and "NO GIRLS ALLOWED" signs, hand drawn on pieces of notebook paper. But they were taped on all the same. With great showmanship, he kicked the doors open like a cowboy bursting into a saloon.

His room looked like it hadn't changed since he was 17. There were posters on nearly every square inch of the walls and Cape Cod-style slanted ceiling, mostly for 80s rock bands. There was a large poster of Slash on the back of one of his doors, and above his racecar bed there was a huge Grateful Dead tapestry.

"Welcome to the Pleasure Dome," he said.

Bill made his way to his closet, and I quickly said, "Oh, Mr. Clinton, I really don't need to see your other Rothcoes, we should just get to the interview."

"Oh, yeah, the Rothcoes. That's okay. We'll get to those another day then. That's not what I'm getting". He rummaged around his closet, and in the bottom of a cardboard box, labeled "homework", he pulled out a can of soda. He brought it back to the center of the room and took a seat in his beanbag chair.

"Pop a squat!" he said, motioning to the egg-chair opposite his bean bag throne. I took a seat on the oval chair next to one of his train sets. As I was taking my seat, I noticed Bill unscrewing the top of his ersatz soda can and extracting a glass pipe and a grinder.

"If my mom ever finds my weed, she'd totally freak," he said.

He began to pack the bowl, so I took out my recorder and set it down. At long last the interview could begin.

"So, mister Clinton," I said. "Your foundation is--"

"C'mon man, hit this," he said, trying to keep the smoke in as interrupted. I tried to tell him no, but he kept pushing.

"This is really good weed, man. If you don't hit this, you're basically wasting it."

I told him I really didn't want to get high right now but looked at me with a twinkle in his eye and said, "that's okay, man, we'll just get a little high." He shot me a wink. We did not get just a little high.

Every time the bowl emptied, I watched Bill produce more flower to pack it full again. Bowl after bowl was smoked, and somewhere around bowl number fourteen I begged him to stop. I could barely think straight, and it felt like my heart was going to beat out of my chest.

"I didn't know you were gonna be such a gay little pussy," Bill Clinton said, ignoring my pleas and handing me the pipe for one more rip. I took a little puff, and Bill said, "you didn't even inhale! What are you running for congress?" I sighed and allowed myself to enter Bill's headspace. I laid back on his racecar bed as at long last he put away his herb and paraphernalia.

"You wanna hear me play the saxophone?" Bill asked as he emerged from the closet empty-handed. I couldn't remember how to talk, but he took my silence in the affirmative. He began rummaging through the trunk of his bed, and finally produced a set of VHS tapes. He put one in the TV across the room and turned the dial to channel 4. The tape was a recording of him on some late-night talk show campaigning for something. He was playing careless whisper.

"Pretty sweet, huh", he asked rhetorically. "Alright, I guess I'm ready to do your little interview or whatever."

Finally. I pulled out my recorder and found myself at a loss for words. My head was too clouded from Bill Clinton's dank.

"What, uh... So, do you think that... did the moon landing happen?" I heard myself ask.

Bill chuckled to himself. "You know, Ike, the moon landing was just one of those things, you know? When they first let me into the White House, I asked the same thing, and do you know what they told me?" He looked at me for affirmation. I shrugged. He didn't say anything, he just winked at me. I'm not sure I've seen anyone wink as much as Bill did.

The talk show host was asking questions now, as Bill had finished playing for the crowd, so he stood up and turned off the TV. He sauntered over to a box and pulled out the *Dark Side of the Moon* album. He put it on his player.

"Hey," he said, barely holding in a chuckle. "Do you wanna hear about my newest art project?"

With great effort, I managed a nod.

"So, like, I'm gonna just shit. Shit all over a canvas, right? And then I'm gonna like, scrape it all around with a palette knife, and then," he wheezed a laugh. "Then I'm gonna sell it at an auction, and the money is gonna go to the Clinton foundation!" He fell to the ground and laughed hard and long at his own joke. He wiped tears from his eyes.

"Aw man. Bill Clinton cracks himself up." He was doubled over, laughing those hard, breathy laughs that only a man with leather lungs could muster. "But seriously man, check this out." Bill began spinning the record backwards with his bare fingers. Pink Floyd blared through the speakers, backward and distorted. The haunting anti-melodies intruded my already clouded mind, and I saw great visions of vast deserts. At that very moment, Bill Clinton came to me in a vision. He towered over me, roaring saxophone notes into the dry, Coptic air. My body emerged from a great woven basket in the form of a snake as his hard-bop post-jazz aroused me from my slumber. I rose and rose, and Bill played louder and louder, and the notes turned into a message that I strained to hear. I yearned to understand what Bill was trying to tell me. I leaned my snake-body

forward, craning my long back, aching to know Bill's secret knowledge-

"THERE IT IS!" he yelled. The music halted and I was lucid again. "Listen," he said with the crazed intensity of a lunatic. Every word that came out of his mouth had the grave seriousness of a schizophrenic man telling you exactly how the world will end. "Listen really closely, Ike. This is where Roger Waters told me I was the Messiah. He told me that I will be a great ruler and bring peace to the kingdom of Israel in the great and terrifying end times. Do you hear it, man? Can you hear Roger's guitar talking to me? He's telling me, man. He's telling *me*."

Bill had worked up quite a sweat. With every word he said his neck strained tighter. Every muscle in his face ached in a competition to see which one could contort hardest. The tendons in his neck strained hard enough that I thought they would burst from under his skin.

"Man, it's a good thing I didn't listen when I was in the Oval Office... There wouldn't be a fuckin' Iran anymore, I can tell you that much. Shit, man. There wouldn't be an England either. *Her majesty Queen of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and of her other realms and-* man FUCK you!" As he said this last part, he slammed his fist on the turntable, hard enough to split the record.

"Aw, I'm sorry, man. No more Waters. I guess I turned Waters into whine, huh?" Again, Bill howled at his own joke. "C'mon, man. I've got one last thing I want you to see."

We left his room and went back down the grand, Corinthian staircase. As we walked, Bill produced a joint from behind his ear and lit it up. In two great sucks, it vanished to nothing but a filter. He flicked it haphazardly aside, and I noted the circular charcoal stain it left on the head of the priceless marble statue. It bounced off and rolled back down the hall before it finally stopped at Bill's feet. One of his many women appeared to pick up the roach. Her bare feet pattered against the tile and she scurried directly in front of Mr. Clinton, cutting him off.

"You bitch!" He roared. "Do you think Bill Clinton is paying you to get in his goddamn way?" The small, dark woman shrank into herself as Bill towered over her. Her naked body pushed further into the cold, hard floor, as she held her hands in front of her face. Mr. Clinton rose his great pale hand into the air.

"What the hell is your name?" he said, hand still poised for attack.

"Juanita," she said.

"No, it isn't! In Bill Clinton's house, only Bill has a name! Do you understand?"

Her voice was small and squeaky. "I'm so sorry Mr. Clinton, sir. It will not happen again. Please, Mr. Clinton sir, please don't hurt me".

"Aww hell," he finally said. "Make yourself useful and pick up the roach. It won't be the only butt you get to pinch today." He prodded me with his elbow and winked for the umpteenth time. "We like to have fun around here," he said. "Don't put this in your story."

As we rounded the final corner, a flock of maids skittered away like roaches. Behind them, the entrance to a great open room. Inside, vines twisted over us like great verdant rafters, rocked by zephyrs that curled between looming Grecian columns.

"I like to come here when I want to have a big ole think," said Bill. He rubbed his chin, and stood for a while in pensive silence. We watched the wind sway the vines, and the birds in the trees. Finally, Bill broke the silence.

"I keep having this dream, man. I'm in a forest, and I'm surrounded by tribesman—you know the type. Big boys with some meat on 'em. The kinda fellas who you just know are looking to eat either you or your horse, depending on what kinda day they've had? Hell, that's the only reason I gave those Chayannese boys their eagle feathers, who knows who they would've eaten?" He sparked another joint and took a long drag.

"But I'm in these woods, surrounded by these fellas, and Ike, believe me when I tell you they are mean. They look at me like I am

just the worst president in the whole wide world, and suddenly their head honcho, or chief, or *morubixaba*—I think they're Tupi—comes over and says something like 'ongo bongo welcome to our jongle,' and I'm not gonna look a warrior like that in the eye and say no! But I guess he doesn't know that, or he sees that I'm not really into it, so he gives his men some sort of look and they tie me up and drag me off and we go down this long and winding path.

"For hours, man, we're just trudging deeper and deeper into the humid darkness, and off deep in the trees along the path, I swear I see something. But the longer I look out into the darkness of the canopy or whatever they call it, the more I think there's nothing there at all and all the while, these boys keep dragging me into the thick of it. And the sounds, Ike, they're like nothing you could believe. I've only heard the birds here in the U. S. of A. and maybe a few of the socialist ones, and maybe some monarchical ones in the sandier regions back during my reign, but man, these birds! They make the strangest sounds. It's like a buzz and a whine, and a few pops—I can't describe it right, but you've just gotta believe me on this, no one has ever heard these sounds outside of the furthest depths of the Amazonian jungle.

"So, these bird sounds keep getting stranger and stranger, and the path gets more clear, and suddenly, we're back in a village full of tribal women and children. All around me I hear people and birds chattering, and the tribesmen keep pulling me and take me to this massive, Texas-sized wigwam, and inside is the oldest man I've ever seen. This wrinkled old glove-face Indian is just sitting there, lit up by the fire he's stirring, and without looking up he motions for me to come in.

"'Welcome back,' he says, and man, I wish I could remember if he said that the first dream. But before I can get to thinking too long about what he means, he says 'Ole Bill, now I'm gonna tell you something important, so listen up.' He says, 'you've been chosen, and I don't just mean to save America. You've been chosen to save the whole world.' Now of course, I'm a little taken aback by this. I mean, you know me, I already know I'm the Messiah and all, but this Indian seems to think I've been chosen for something even more important.

Now, the Indian starts loading up a long pipe with some pretty stank-ass vegetable matter, if you catch my drift, Ike. Then he tells me, 'try not to forget what I'm about to tell you.' He takes a long drag of his long pipe, he holds it in, then he blows it out into my face. Now, I don't know Indian culture and etiquette, but I do know normal etiquette, and that's just not a very kind thing to do in Arkansas, so I start to yell at him. Well, I try, but as soon as I open my mouth, I find I can't.

"Suddenly, my whole body is made of wood and I'm like this giant unghari tree. For some reason, I know I've been watching over these people for eons. My mind is flooded with the secrets of the galaxy, and the universe and stuff. And it's all flowing in from the earth mother down below, up through my roots, like I'm the universe's knowledge antenna. And I'm so totally discombobulated that I just have to wake up and recombobulate myself, or the whole universe will disappear! At which point, I of course find I cannot. It's not until I give in and allow myself to live the life of every human being who has ever lived that I can finally rest. I just have to sit there and endure every act of evil and kindness that ever has and ever will occur, all while these Indians strip away my bark to roll fat-ass blunts with. Are you still following, Ike? Because this is when it starts getting really good.

"So once I finish living every life, and having every single human emotion—and by the way, did you know that happiness in the '30s feels different than it does now? And that sadness in the Roman Empire was a vastly different sensation than it is right now, but in the future, it becomes the same again? Never mind, it doesn't matter. So, the earth mother comes to me in the form of a leopard. Like, the spirit of the earth itself, just sitting there in a leopard body. I know she's the earth mother, and she knows I'm Bill Clinton. But at this point, I've entirely forgotten the concept of self, because of the whole living everyone's life bit. But she says to me, 'now do you understand?' Ike, she's so kind about it too. She gently paws a little bug off of my root that was squirming around and tickling me, and I tell her, 'I don't know,' because I don't know. Now, I don't think leopards can smile, but Gia does, and she says, 'that's okay little one,

you don't need to. Just don't forget what we've shown you.' and then, finally, I wake up."

Bill stared at me for a long time. He was out of breath. I was still pretty high, so I was having some trouble remembering all of the details of his story, but my tape recorder got it. "Sounds like a crazy dream, man," I said. I wished he would stop looking at me with his crazed, red eyes.

"No, man. That was no dream," he said. "That was the real world. What were in right now, that's the dream," he said. "Weren't you listening to anything I said, man? That's the real world! I've lived your life a thousand times, and I've lived mine a thousand. We've had this entire conversation a thousand times! I know you better than you know yourself, and I know with certainty what's going to happen in the world we'll leave behind." He threw a piece of gravel through one of the windows in the ceiling of his arboretum and screamed.

"I am everyone, everyone is me! Don't you get it? Don't you understand anything? Why are you asking me questions about the damn Clinton Foundation? You should be asking me about why I, the god that created this very universe, picked Pi exactly the way I did! Why did I, your creator, make Hydrogen the way I made it! Why did I pick the gravitational constant in such a way that you could exist? Aren't you even a little curious?"

Bill was beginning to worry me, so I started backing away.

"Aww heck," he said. "I'm just teasin', Ike." He clapped me on the back. "But don't forget, I've already lived your life a thousand times, so I know what you're going to say about me. I don't mind. Don't bother sending me a review copy, just publish what you're going to publish."

I all but ran out of the room, past his harem, to the front door. Before I could get it open, Bill put his hand on it, holding it closed.

"Ike," he said. He chuckled, "you do this every time, man." He winked at me. "You forgot your keys in my room."

TIFFANY GREEN

Tiffany Green had a morning routine
And every day at 8:15

She showered and shaved.
She put cream on her face.
And after she bathed,
she arranged her bookcase.

She put on her clothes,
and made sure she packed mittens.
She watered her rose
and she walked to the kitchen.

She made herself breakfast—
rye toast with ham.
Like every morning
she followed this plan.

She feared if she didn't
her day was unclean;
it made her feel better
to have a routine.

She touched her nose twice
before using a fork,
so she'd would remember
to shop after work.

Before leaving that day
she pet her dog Julie,

it was her habit
so days would run smoothly.

She flipped two gold coins,
watched them land on the floor
and tugged her right ear
as she opened the door.

She feared if she didn't
her day was unclean;
it made her feel better
to have a routine.

She went to the daycare
so she could acquire
a young sacrifice
so her crops would grow higher.

She worshipped Xiveecheth
the giant slug god.
She thought about death
and she killed a small dog.

She jumped up and down
while speaking in tongues.
Every morning she did this,
while flaying her sons.

She feared if she didn't
her day was unclean;
it made her feel better
to have a routine.

She made pacts with the devil
for long blissful life.
She yelled at her neighbors;
threatened them with a knife.

She drowned a few orphans
and threw a few cats
and stomped on a bird
then she swallowed a rat.

And she made it to work
just before ten.
Good thing she followed her plan
once again.

'Cause she feared if she didn't
her day was unclean;
it made her feel better
to have a routine.

IN THE SLAMMER

AFTER THE INCIDENT, we were forced to clean lunch tables every day for a week. It was totally unfair because no one even got hurt, and really, what we did was a service. But kids just don't look out for one another anymore. So there we were, still sentenced to clean for three more weeks. Fortunately, Peter and I were the industrious type. While the rest of the rubes stood in line, figuratively, though often literally, pissing themselves with anxiety over Mrs. Crowley's return, we cleaned as fast as our hands allowed. With a filthy rag, I whipped hundreds of rice grains into the great beyond and they landed outside our zone of responsibility. Peter, wielding a broom, likewise launched whatever lunch pieces had settled onto the cold tile floor clear across the cafeteria. The four tables we were responsible for were absolutely pristine. The adjacent ones looked like the kindergarteners just finished bring your pet to lunch day.

At last, Mrs. Crowley arrived to pick up our classmates. Obviously, these kids were too foolish find their own way back to her hellhole of a classroom, so some direction was necessary. At the sight

of her piggish, bulldog head rammed through the open door, Peter and I did our best to appear repentant, but as soon as the caboose (a real joke of a job, where a kid is put in charge of making sure no one wanders off. Not unlike a sheep dog herding cattle but requiring less intelligence) made his way through the door, we threw our cleaning instruments to the ground and left in the opposite direction. This had been our routine for the past few weeks and there was no reason to change it up today.

We were tired of slipping out to the playground for a hasty see-saw every day, so today we decided to do a few laps of the school before returning to class. On a normal day we could budget about ten minutes before we needed to slip back into class, but today we finished our job faster than normal. As such, we decided we deserved at least fifteen minutes away from the repugnant sloth that was Mrs. Crowley.

"I heard Crowley's getting a divorce," Peter said, breaking the solemn rhythm of our feet echoing on the piss-colored tile floors.

"Figures," I said. "I'd be surprised if anyone could stand her for more than a year. I can't believe her mom didn't give her up as soon as she saw the ultrasound."

We both laughed.

"You know who's really a buttcheek of a person," I said, "Lisa Brannigan."

"Oh, that girl with all the horse crap?"

"Yeah. God, horses are so lame. I bet she wants to suck on a horse's you-know-what." Peter did, in fact, know what. This is how we spent most after-lunch walks. We would spew gossip about our classmates and teachers, bounce business ideas off of each other, just regular second grade stuff. Peter was the only classmate I could halfway stand.

We walked quietly for a while. Peter looked contemplative. Eventually, he said, "You know, I bet that buttcheek Lisa was the one who ratted on us!" It made sense. Lisa was the only one who stood to gain by turning us in. Also, she hated me.

"I bet you're right!" I said. "That absolute troll. Why does she like horses so much? She looks more like a dairy cow." Peter agreed.

Before we could continue our discourse about our bovinescent classmate, we rounded a corner and suffered the great misfortune of discovering our class standing in line outside the bathroom.

"Glad you found us!" Mrs. Crowley said. Her words dripped with disgusting saccharine sincerity. She was about as sweet as a raisin and just as wrinkled. We assumed our place at the back of the line, much to the caboose's chagrin. He glared at us and stomped to his rightful place behind us. You've got to respect a kid who does his job.

When we arrived back in the classroom, Mrs. Crowley, in her infinite wisdom, declared it was time for arts and crafts. Now, I'm no girl, but I do like arts and crafts time. I thought today might finally be the day I started drawing my comic book, *The Flying Frog*. As I was planning out the story and considering the artistic medium for my masterpiece, Peter walked over to my drafting table.

"Hey, Frank. I know how we can get Lisa back for ratting on us." I was intrigued. "Check this out," he said and revealed a permanent marker. I gasped and snatched it out of his hands in a scramble to get it out of sight.

"Are you crazy? You can't have those things at school! You can get serious detention!"

"Yeah, well, I can't exactly take it home now. You wanna screw up Lisa's horse notebook?" He motioned to the wooden containers lined up at the side of the classroom. Four backpacks hung in each container above a tryphobia-inducing cluster of cubbies. A notebook was sitting in the cubby labeled "Lisa" in curly handwriting. On its cover, several stallions charged across a grassy field.

Wordlessly, I accepted the marker from Peter. While he kept a lookout, I did some arts and crafts of my own on Lisa's notebook. I colored in each horse with the black marker, lengthening the you-know-whats, or adding them as necessary. I gave one horse an extra head, and another a giraffe neck. I drew an expertly crafted pile of diarrhea under one proud mare, and poked holes all the way through the eyes of a few of them with a pencil. At last, my masterpiece was

complete. I couldn't sign it, but I needed some way to top it off. What would The Mona Lisa have been if Da Vinci never put his name on it? So as not to lose all artistic credibility, I elected to write on the inside cover. Perhaps inspired by Calliope herself, I was so moved to inscribe, "you stupid buttcheek" within her solemn tome.

"That's what happens when you try to screw me over, Lisa. That is what happens," I said to no one in particular. I replaced the notebook in its cubby and resumed work on my comic book at the drawing table.

I hadn't drawn more than two panels when I heard the shrill cry of a weasel. Lisa finally got what was coming to her. Her face turned progressively darker shades of red, until at long last she let out a wail. Every head in the class turned and Mrs. Crowley rushed over; perhaps she mistook the howling for the mating call of a chimpanzee. She scooped up Lisa and the notebook, and attempted to comfort her; at the same time, she tried to assess the emotional damage one of her students had wrought upon the girl.

"Who did this?" she roared. "Who ruined Lisa's notebook?" Everyone looked around in an attempt to spot the guilty party. I too feigned disbelief and swiveled my head.

"Come forward now, and you'll be in less trouble," she said. I of course, did no such thing. I didn't believe the old lair — she had tried to pull this kind of thing before. A few weeks back someone was caught breaking pencils and she made the same offer. But when Kate came forward with a confession, she ended up missing recess for two weeks. One shudders to imagine what would have happened if she had been caught in a lie! I have to believe it would have been the same thing, and anyway, I was brought up to believe it's morally wrong to make deals with the devil. I'm sorry, but it's just my policy, so I kept quiet.

"Well then," she said with piggish glee, "I guess I just have to punish all of you." She was pleased with herself. A snagged grin ripped across her putrid face. She didn't get to enact mass punishments very often. In fact, I hadn't seen her this giddy since she nailed me and the four others as instigators of the great food fight of

'96. She took away our chair privileges for that. I suppose it's more correct to say she took away 4/5ths of our chair privileges, because between the five of us, we were given one chair for a week. We hauled that chair to and from classes and lunch, and we were forced to take turns sitting on it as we grew tired. The pallid witch would yell if we sat anywhere other than that one chair, forcing us to squabble over whose turn it was to rest. It was a creative punishment, I'll give her that but if I had a chin hair for every time I wished death upon her, my face would be as coarse and thorny as hers.

"And would you look at that!" she said. She motioned to the clock. "It's time for recess. Well, it's time for Lisa to have recess. Until one of you comes forward or is brought forward by your less morally bankrupt classmates, no one plays." She lined us up and marched us out to the prison yard.

Mrs. Crowley, the fascist that she was, made us stand in a military-like row off to the side. She forced us to watch Lisa gallivant around, alone on the playground. Being alone was probably nothing new for her. I don't know anyone who can stand her. I've never seen anyone talk to her unless they're trying to swindle some candy off her at lunch. She perpetually looked like a frog mid-croak, so we were really doing her a favor when we took her candy bars. That buttcheek.

"This is B.S. and it is really P-ing me off!" a disgruntled voice said somewhere behind me. Despite his ineloquent, abbreviation-laden sentence, I agreed. This was really Crowley's fault for not understanding the prisoner's dilemma. Why would I ever turn myself in? Whatever punishment that demonic hell-beast had in store for me couldn't be less brutal than missing one measly recess. She made the mistake of assuming I care about my classmates—I don't. I'll drag them all down with me if it means I don't have to apologize to Lisa.

Rumors swept through the line. Each offered a different theory on who did it and why. I hadn't heard this much speculation since Coach Rollie cheated on his wife with the music teacher (and her daughter if the rumors were true).

"I heard Steph did it, Lisa didn't invite her to her birthday party."

"I did not!" a voice further down the line said. "It was Abigail, she can't stand Lisa!" More rebuttals and accusations were thrown until finally one stuck.

"I heard Lisa did it to herself. She has no friends and knew this would happen."

"Yeah! I bet this is her sick way of punishing all of us for hating her, even though she deserves it."

"I can't believe she would be such a jerk."

Maybe it's because Lisa was sitting on the seesaw alone, unable to defend herself, but once this rumor took hold, it stuck. This was good. I began to aid in its spread, with little details sprinkled in to make it more palatable to my rubes.

"Oh yeah," I told Joanna, the doll enthusiast aft of me. "I heard Lisa did it to herself just to see what would happen! She probably just wanted to frame one of us, but if we all go down, she doesn't care."

"She probably just wanted her mom to buy her a new notebook," I told another kid in my vicinity. "And I heard her dad beats her anyway." I'm not sure why I added that last part, but it seemed to add verisimilitude.

As I spun a particularly ripping yarn about how Lisa's whole family tried to put her up for adoption last Christmas, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I turned around to see none other than Kate, the pencil breaker. She seemed unhappy to say the least.

"I know it was you," she said.

"What are you talking about?"

"I saw you. Peter brought in that permanent marker, and you used it to draw in Lisa's notebook. I saw the whole thing while I was getting construction paper."

What the hell was the point of Peter being a lookout if he couldn't warn me about these things? "Okay, so I did it. What, are you gonna tattle on me?"

"Give me one good reason I shouldn't."

"Well what do you want? I'm something of a kid that knows how to get things. Anything you want, sister. You name it, I name my

price." I grinned. "Of course, this time it's on the house." She was unimpressed.

"It's gonna cost you big, Frank. Get me a pack of smokes and I won't rat on you."

"Hey, no problem! I'll steal them from my dad tonight, bing bang boom, lickity-split they're yours."

"No, I want them by the end of recess. Next recess they're worthless. We'll all be back on the playground, playing our little games. I need them today." Her voice was tense. She sounded like she was on edge, so I just nodded. I had a few ideas where I could get a pack. Mrs. Trowl always took a smoke break around this time of day, maybe I could bum one.

I asked the putrid pedagogue if I could go for a bathroom break and to my surprise, she nodded. Her beak-like nose swooped past me as she did so, but I was too relieved to care. I went around back of the school to the teacher's parking lot, but Mrs. Trowl was nowhere to be found. It figures she'd pick today of all days to try and quit. I knew she'd be back tomorrow, a slave to her death sticks. Her whole being looked like a used-up lung anyway—brown and splotchy with wisps of smoke-like hair that twisted out of her head. She sickened me. So did Kate for that matter; she doesn't even smoke! She just wanted to look cool in front of her stupid friends.

I was about to head back, and I was wondering how hard I needed to throw a rock at Kate's head to wipe out her memories of my crimes when I saw it. Pristine and brilliant, white against the asphalt, beautiful and long; a cigarette. The one thing that could save my life was this cigarette. It was only one, but it was the best Kate was going to get. As I approached, I noticed it was half burnt. So much for quitting, Mrs. Trowl. She must have abandoned it when she realized her class was unattended at the expense of her fifteenth smoke break today. I scooped it up and swaddled it like a baby. My little tobacco friend, today we are going to make history. Into my pocket it went.

Kate badgered me as soon as I assumed my spot back in line. "You got the stuff?" Her breath was wet and eager.

"I got it," I said, and withdrew the single cigarette I had crammed into my jeans. I tried to hand it to her, but she wouldn't take it.

"What the hell is this?" she hissed. "I asked for a pack of cigarettes, I couldn't have been clearer! What, did you just pick this up off the ground? Do you think I'm some sort of weird hobo who just smokes other people's used roaches like an animal?" She gave it a sniff. "And it's a menthol? Can you do anything right?" She slapped my hand away.

I shook with rage. No, she's not going to ruin the rest of my month with whatever punishment Crowley has in store, not if I have anything to say about it. I watched Lisa slide, and run to the monkey bars all alone. It was almost graceful, beautiful even, though Lisa's face made it less so. I couldn't stand being in this cage for one more second, so I marched right up to Mrs. Crowley—as close as I could without vomiting—and tattled before Kate could.

"I know who drew on Lisa's notebook," I said. "I just didn't wanna say because she's my friend." I looked back at Kate and Mrs. Crowley followed my gaze with sulfuric, beady eyes.

"Now why would Kate do that?" she said through gritted teeth.

"I don't know, but I'm really worried about her. She's going down a really bad path." As I said this, I tried my best to feign concern. I couldn't tell if she bought it or not. Demons are usually quite clever. "First it was breaking the pencils, then the notebook, and I saw her trip earlier, and this fell out from behind her ear!" I withdrew the now crumpled cigarette. You're done Kate. Absolutely finished.

Mrs. Crowley's eyes grew to normal human size before shrinking back their beady resting state. "Are you telling me the truth, Frank? Did that really happen?" It didn't matter how I responded. She was already plotting the perfect punishment to inflict upon Kate. Once she decided her method, there was nothing I could do to change her mind.

"I'm positive, Mrs. Crowley. I'm really worried about her!" She devoured my sweet lies. The universe smiled upon me; my fibs

were like Mozart to her cauliflower ears. She marched toward Kate, grabbed her and began screaming at full volume. I didn't pay much attention to what she said, but I did hear when she yelled, "you kids go enjoy the rest of your recess. I'm sorry this future *drug dealer* took so much of it from you."

"Yes!" I cried. Freedom at last. I pointed at Kate, and with the ecstasy-like endorphins coursing through my veins, in my utter euphoria I didn't think about what I was saying. "That's what you get you stupid buttcheek!"

At the sound of this beautiful and clever aphorism, Mrs. Crowley's head snapped up. "What did you just call her?"

I shrunk back. "A... a stupid buttcheek?" My life flashed before my eyes. I realized I was the only person in my 2nd grade class with the mental acuity required to piece such an articulate sentence together. I was the only one who could have said that, and I wrote it in Lisa's notebook. The jig is up. Mrs. Crowley let go of Kate and snatched my arm with her harpy talons.

"You are in a lot of trouble," she said, and I was shuffled off. Where they will take me, I don't know. What they will do with me is anyone's guess. I've done my crimes, and now I must pay for them in the slammer.

Moksha

AND... WE'RE IN!" Vance unplugged his lockpick and the door faded away.

"Are you sure about this?" Palmer said.

"There's no turning back now. Either we get it, or Mr. Landham gets us." Palmer sighed. There was no scenario where they survived without taking Dax's stash. He wouldn't normally be so nervous about this kind of mission. In the past, they had stolen innumerable credits from virtual bank vaults, assassinated a governor in the MeatWorld by luring him to Landham's server, they even kidnapped the child of Landham's biggest supplier and put his mind into a void. By the time he promised not to rat on the organization, his son had gone completely insane. Compared to that, a standard robbery was routine, but people who went to Dax Sallow's palace always seemed to disappear.

Palmer looked at Vance, his avatar a smooth, faceless head on a suit, identical to his. He nodded. They entered the house and Palmer

couldn't help but freeze, stunned by the sheer opulence. The synth-marble that lined the walls had ridiculously high-end raytracing, and the polygon count on the molding was immense. The daedal fractal patterns engraved on seemingly everything were so intricate that Palmer never saw a single voxel; maybe they were procedurally generated. Every available surface had artistry carved into it. Not a smooth surface in sight. A place like this cost serious money. The server farm alone probably cost more than a year of Palmer's rent.

"Come on, we don't have time to gawk," said Vance as he rounded a corner. Palmer followed him down the long hallway.

"Alright, Mr. Landham's intel says it should be through the last door on the right," said Vance. He walked slowly, his visual cortex almost at capacity rendering a map of the house. As they moved, their footsteps were padded by the elaborate Persian rug whose every fiber was individually rendered with full, soft-body dynamics. Each footstep left a gentle imprint on the mesh without a sound.

"This is it," said Vance. Palmer reached for the door, but the moment his hand brushed the knob, alarms shattered the silence of the mansion. Harsh, metal barriers slammed down over the windows and doors.

"He has a biolock! We need an extraction, now! Guys, pull us out!" Vance screamed into his communicator. His avatar dissolved into the air and left no trace, abandoning Palmer. They must have just locked communications. They couldn't pull his consciousness back to the server; he was trapped. Alarms screamed and Palmer furiously looked for his disruptor. He had it on a holster when he came in, but it was nowhere to be found.

"You won't find your weapons," said a gravelly voice. Palmer turned around to see Dax Sallow, a spectral man looming over him. He gasped and tried to take a step back, but he was pinned to a wall. "They despawned the moment you walked in. What happened to your friend? And take off that mask, it's so garish." Dax flicked his hand and Palmer's avatar dissolved like a million grains of salt. It fell to the ground and his presence was reconstructed into the shape of his meat-body. "Much better." Dax sighed. "He must have gotten out

before the quarantine activated. I really need to have a word with my security staff... Well, Palmer, at least I have you."

Dax walked to the door and touched the knob. The alarm deactivated and the door vanished. "Come on then," he said. "Don't you want to see what you came for?"

"How do you know?"

"Do you really think I can't afford a few rats in your organization? I mean really, they're quite cheap. I have eyes everywhere—make a note of that. Not that it matters really... now that I have your mind and the server is cold."

Every item simulated in the room was either mahogany or red leather. A large wooden desk, as ornate as any other fixture in the house, sat in the center of the room surrounded by countless bookshelves housing myriad antique authors. Dax took a seat at the desk and motioned for Palmer to do the same.

"Why don't you just kill me and get it over with," said Palmer.

"That would be such a waste. You're worth more to me alive than dead—I'm well aware of your *curriculum vitae*. And kill? How barbaric! I would place your mind in a nice empty server, slow down time, and throw away the key. I don't want to, but I will if you make me. But, kill you? Perish the thought." He cracked a smile, revealing two rows of perfectly straight teeth as gray as his skin.

Dax opened a drawer in his desk and withdrew a small golden square. A ThoughtCard, and a rare one by the look of it. He flipped it around in his hands, inspecting the weight and watched the coruscated light dance on the ceiling for a moment before he handed it to Palmer. Its edges were rough, stippled with tiny bumps on the outer perimeter with wavy crenulation inside. The innermost portion of the ThoughtCard was perfectly lustered, flat and reflective. The characters "LD-50" were inscribed on its center in matte text.

"It's an interesting download," Dax said. "Allegedly, it was first thought by a Tibetan monk. It's supposed to be the full comprehension of Nirvana, but it's really just a patchwork thought based around a few others I've already tried. Though, I must say, altogether, I really enjoyed it. Of course, I've fully comprehended

death, experienced eternity, and grasped the concepts of non-existence and unreality, but the way this thought stitches them all together to present a surreal quilt on the mind's palette is exquisite." His arm swooped in a parabolic blur as he snatched it back out of Palmer's hands. "Of course, it's all simulated. A mind thinking about not thinking, augmented by a computer I suppose. It's synthetic—a cheap rip off. It's also not really worth your life, is it? I'm sure Mr. Landham could just buy one of my copies; you people are great at breaking my copy-protection. I don't know why you want it so badly. it's so cheap! So sophomoric."

"I didn't have time to ask," Palmer said. He began tapping his foot on the ground, a MeatWorld habit he carried over to the VRScene. "What's your point?"

"My point is I want to make a deal. I've heard whisperings about a new thought deep in the VRScene: *Moksha*. If you can bring it to me, you'll never have to work again." He waved his arm and the metal blast doors that previously protected the windows and doors of the manor slipped into the ether, vanishing from sight.

"Why don't you just send one of your people to get it?" Palmer said.

"Well, for one, my other employees are busy with more important tasks. This is just a passion project of mine. But I suppose, oh, I don't know... *Moksha* just has a history."

"A history?"

"Every time it's been synthesized, the first person to try it destroys it. About half the time they go insane. My intel says it's just too easy to record it wrong. It does something to the mind that can't be undone. I've lost a lot of good people that way. It's just easier if it's not someone on payroll, someone whose funeral I don't have to reimburse." He sighed, his eyes scrunching up with a look better suited for the avuncular audience of an elementary school play than a hostage negotiation. Palmer, on the other hand, could feel his body in the meat world sublimating cold sweat.

"Wonderful. Either you kill me now or I kill myself later, is that it?"

"On the contrary," said Dax. "I have the utmost faith in you."

Palmer sighed. This heist was a mistake. "Why should I bother. I'll just go back and tell Mr. Landham what happened."

Dax considered for a moment. "My people already have you surrounded in the MeatWorld. Technically your body is in police custody. So, let me be clear; if I don't have *Moksha* in my hands in... oh, a week's time, I'll just place your mind in an empty server. I wonder how slow I can make time pass for you. I'm sure we can harvest some good thoughts from your suffering as well... There's quite a market for that, you know. How does 'Dax Sallow Presents: Anguish #4' sound? I think it has a nice ring to it. I think it'll sell, how about you?"

Rather than answering, Palmer dove at him. He may not be able to find a clandestine escape, but he could force his way out. He soared. Simulated air blew his hair back (this must cost a fortune) and he should have rammed Dax's torso. Instead, he passed right through.

"Come now, collision isn't turned on," Dax grinned.

Palmer got up and tried to rip books from Dax's shelf, flip his desk over, move a pencil, anything! But he couldn't. His hands passed through everything he touched, save for the cold floor beneath.

"Are you finished?" said Dax.

Palmer didn't respond. He panted heavily on the floor. Suddenly, he sprung up, rushing for the open door, only to collide with the air in its frame. It bounced him like an invisible sheet of latex as it stretched impossibly far before it sprung him back to Dax's feet. Dax looked down, completely expressionless.

"Fine," Palmer said between heavy breaths, crumpled on the floor. "I guess I don't really have a choice."

"Excellent!" Dax pulled him to his feet and shook his hand. "It's so good to employ an expert for once. Funny, with all the money in the world I still can't just buy one of you. I would think loyalty has a price, but I suppose not. It's a shame, really. I don't like that I have to make threats, but it's worth it, you'll see. Worth it for both of us." He led Palmer back to his seat at the desk and resumed his own position opposite him.

From his desk, he withdrew a little silver rectangle. At one end, a wire, leading somewhere off Dax's desk and into the shadows. It looked like the kind Palmer had seen on server terminals. On the other end, the box housed a small hole beveled with iridescent metal.

"It's a private MindRouter," Dax said. "It will take you where you need to be. Go ahead. Clock's ticking." Palmer outstretched a reluctant hand and placed his finger into the router.

"Good luck," said Dax. He pushed the button atop the box and Palmer's vision flashed white.

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Jumping from server to server was always uncomfortable. Some people think it causes your consciousness to die. Any break in the continuous stream of thought means death. They think the person that jumped servers ceased to exist. They were replaced with a new version on the other side; a new person with all the same memories, all the same thoughts—a perfect clone. But these days, most people just accepted their subjective experience wasn't continuous. Sure, there were a few luddites who refused to switch servers, but generally, the zealots stayed in the MeatWorld. People have no qualms with falling asleep; hell, Palmer had been knocked out a couple of times just on the job. If he did die every time he lost consciousness, it didn't really matter. It was just an inevitability of life.

He blinked a few times as his brain rendered the room. Everything was foggy. A perfect, gaussian blur according to his VR specs. Had he sprung for a newer model, or a better connection he could see crystal clear, "realer than life" HD, but he couldn't pay Landham's exorbitant prices. This, a constant point of contention with HR, was still being negotiated by the Mercenary's Union, so Palmer sat and waited as the room came into view.

Things became a little more clear, and he saw that he was surrounded by people, that much he could tell—people wearing white. It was still too blurry to figure out what was going on. In front

of him, he could just make out avatars sitting in chairs surrounded by others in white coats.

"Who are you?" someone asked. Palmer turned, his vision finally normal. The voice belonged to a dark-haired woman in a white lab coat.

"What are you doing here?" she said. Hulking security guards came over and Palmer stayed quiet. The room was near capacity with people in chairs and wired to machines. This was probably one of Dax's suppliers. These places were dangerous. It seemed unlikely they'd be manufacturing *Moksha*—if they were, Dax could have just come himself—but maybe he could find someone here who was. Maybe it was someone's eccentric passion project. There's always one of those people, or at least, that's how popular culture made it seem. He just needed to get ahold of one of the technicians. Maybe they would know something. Guards came closer and Palmer realized he had to say something.

"I'm just here to inspect the place for the boss," he said.

"What's your name? Are you the floor manager?"

The woman squinted at him. "Why don't you follow me to the security office," she said. What a stupid lie. Dax must have put him here so the employees would get rid of him.

The woman and the three guards led him down a bleak, reseda hallway. As they walked, Palmer looked through the windows that lined the walls. Most rooms held a few people, unconscious in chairs, wired to a machine that harvested their thoughts for later sale. Through a seemingly soundproof window, Palmer heard the muffled scream of a person in severe pain. He looked through the poorly rendered glass and saw another avatar, the same one as the woman leading him, remove a plug from a helmet she was wearing. She typed something on her keyboard and plugged herself in again. She pushed a button and this time wailed even louder in unimaginable anguish. Tears cut lines on her cheeks and she used all of her strength to untether herself from the machine. She crumpled into her chair, a heap of sweat, shaking, and scrawled something on her clipboard.

"Amplification testing," the woman leading him to the office said. "As you can see, it's been successful. We can increase our

product's potency by nearly a factor of ten." She held the door for him, and they entered the office. It materialized in front of them, only rendered as they looked at it, a sensible business practice. Before him, a lonely, low-poly desk, devoid of all but a single biometric scanning device appeared, one voxel at a time. The guards blocked the door.

"Well?" she said.

"You really don't know who I am?" Palmer was not good at bluffing. He prayed Dax had done something to their system. He looked around, and attempted to find anything in the spartan room he could use as a weapon, just in case.

"No, and you're beginning to piss me off," she said. "Put your finger in the scanner."

"I want to speak to the plant manager."

"You already are. Now put your finger in the damn scanner or you're going into server custody."

Palmer took a deep breath and without time for deliberation, eased his finger onto the scanner. The motion wasn't really necessary of course; it was just a signature of consent for the server to read his DNA in the MeatWorld. He consented and the reader light blinked faster and faster until finally, it blinked green.

"See, was that so hard?" the manager said. "You of all people should know I can't just let anyone who logs in wander around the server. Mr. Landham would have a fit." Of course. Mr. Landham was always working on experimental thoughts, and Dax couldn't send one of his own people here. But as far as he knew, they weren't developing anything called *Moksha*. At least he had never heard of it, but Mr. Landham was always pushing the envelope of what a ThoughtCard could hold.

When he first patented them, he just used them to download college courses into lazy students' minds. That was, until he found black market to be more lucrative. Mr. Landham was one of the first people to realize people were less interested in downloading a full understanding of fluid mechanics if they could buy a mind deep in the throes of some entheogenic trip. The results were spectacular. He made a fortune, and the government couldn't do anything about it.

People, understandably, got upset when the government tried to legislate “illegal thoughts”.

“Come on then, you’re clear. I’ll take you to the floor. I’m Diane by the way,” she said and handed him a visitor badge.

After a short walk, they arrived in a spacious hall, populated with a multitude of people. Each, either a random avatar in a chair, or a copy of Diane wandering the room with a clipboard. A polytentacled octopus of copper wire and insulated cable rested on each of the seated avatars’ heads. Cords snaked across the ground and into machine terminals.

“This is the production room,” said Diane, “where raw thoughts are harvested for editing. As you can see, we’ve implemented the new machines to multiplex the thoughts on the fly. It saves storage and time.” She walked to a doppelgänger holding a clipboard.

“Vanessa, this is an inspector from the main office. Can you tell him a little about what you do day to day? Vanessa is our top engineer. She headed the multiplexing initiative. This whole room was personally coded by her.”

She looked up and shook Palmer’s hand. “There’s not much to say, really. We used a rectangular model for the room to save on polygons so we could house more scanners. This is the recreational drug room, as you can see. It’s the largest one we have.” She motioned at the closest seated subject. Her stride was shaky and nervous, as was her voice. “The subjects are safely in an undisclosed MeatWorld location, tripping, rolling, or stoned on their various assigned drugs.” She motioned to the seated man, “This gentleman is Vman_720x; he’s our tripper of the month.”

“How does one get that title?” asked Palmer.

“He took 10,000 micrograms of acid to make the ‘Edge of Eternity’ card. It’s a bestseller. We’re all pretty proud of that one.” She let out a nervous laugh.

Vman sat motionless in his chair, eyes fluttering occasionally, pupils rolled deep into the back of his head.

“Thanks, Vanessa,” said Diane. “If you’ll follow me this way, I’ll show you our top of the line editing rooms. They’re quite a leg up

from how they used to be! In fact, we just built a new machine that inverts--"

"I'm sorry, it's just... I was sent with a specific task." said Palmer.

"Oh? What is it? I'm sure we can help."

"I was specifically asked to see how the *Moksha* project was coming along," Palmer said. A total shot in the dark.

"Christ, I wish corporate would stop calling it that. But sure, of course. Come on, I'll show you."

She led him out of the thought farm and down another long hallway into a room filled with Diane-clones pecking away at computer interfaces. Occasionally, they interfaced with the thought. Far from the winces of agony Palmer had witnessed earlier, these editors' faces became totally calm, happy even.

"Seems like you got the whole insanity kink worked out," Palmer said.

She rolled her eyes. "That's just an urban legend. We can't really sell something that reality-bending. Who would buy that?"

"How will the customers know if it's real?" said Palmer.

"Here, do you want a sample? It's quite a trip."

Palmer shrugged. She handed him a cord to interface with the thought. He closed his eyes and plugged in.

At once, his vision was filled with beautiful, kaleidoscopic patterns that danced in circles before changing into impossible shapes. He suddenly understood what it was like to be dead, what it was like to be a rock, and how time is the only thing that's real. The colors and shapes became more and more intricate, leaping into the third dimension in his mind's eye. He felt a tremendous loss of self. He was a mind without a body, and his mind seemed to have no memories, personality, or preferences. He was just a being that could perceive, and the whole of the universe was a circus tent of whirling color.

He opened his eyes and was back in the testing room with Diane.

"That's it?" he said.

"Well, we're still working on it. It's hard to live up to the myth you know. This is as close as we could get."

"What is it?"

"Oh, you know, a little DMT here, a couple of religious experiences, umm... We had a Hindu guest speaker a while ago, so we put him in. And of course, lots of concentrated acid."

"But it's real?"

"As real as we could make it," she said. "You won't go crazy but it's definitely a wild ride. I'm sure our customers will like it!" Palmer was unconvinced. Diane looked around for anything to change the subject. She looked back up and asked "Is there anything else you'd like to see? Maybe you'd be interested in the packaging and dist-"

"I'm sorry, excuse me, Diane," another clone popped her head in the doorway. "We're having some trouble extracting a thought from one of the machines. We think it's corrupted, probably not safe to test. Should we just scrap it?"

Diane sighed and turned to Palmer. "Excuse me just a second." She left the room. Finally alone, Palmer inspected the machine. He pushed what appeared to be an eject button and out popped a cerulean blue ThoughtCard labeled *Mock-Moksha Prototype-17*. Perfect. All around him the Diane clones were hard at work, absorbed in clipboards or computer monitors. Anyone else was unconscious, or so high they wouldn't know what they were seeing anyway, so Palmer slipped the little blue card into his pocket, adding it to his permanent inventory allowing it to cross server boundaries. As soon as the information representing the ThoughtCard moved to memory in Palmer's private server, alarms blared. Red lights flashed throughout the room and every conscious person in the server's head snapped up.

"WARNING," blared a loudspeaker. "OUT-OF-BOUNDS MEMORY WRITE FROM PROTECTED REGION."

Palmer's avatar had a blue glow; he was marked as a thief. Before the door could lock him in, he raced out. His feet pounded the tile floor below, but luckily the server owner was too cheap to render the sound of footsteps dynamically. Every stentorian clap his heavy

gait should have produced was only rendered as the soft patter of a shoe on tile. Though sound wasn't a problem, his now glowing avatar was. If Vance were here, this wouldn't be a problem; he could disable any security measure on a server. He was the best. Compared to him, Palmer was just a hired gun with a long string of good luck. He hoped it would hold out now.

"There he is!" a guard shouted from an adjacent hallway. Another one cornered him at the end of the corridor. Palmer darted into the nearest door, an editing room. Inside was a desk, a few computer monitors and a chair—nothing of use. He went to the desk and ripped open a drawer. He threw pens and files out with haphazard fervor. Of course, why would there be a disruptor here? These people are programmers, not gangsters. Under a performance review for the owner of this desk—attendance was a real problem for them, apparently—he saw a small plastic rack holding a neat row of ThoughtCards. He plucked a card labeled *Extreme Withdrawal* from its position in the rack and loaded it into the nearest machine. Guards were getting closer, so he had to act fast. He found a helmet, started the machine, and stood by the doorway.

Just as he got into position, a bald man in a suit jutted his large head through the doorway. Before he could even look in his direction, Palmer slammed the helmet onto his head. The guard wailed and collapsed onto the ground, writhing in pain. Palmer stepped over him as the guard made retching sounds. The guard's MeatWorld-body coated his VR equipment in vomit. Palmer clambered through the hallway, careful to look through every available doorway. Somewhere in this building was a server terminal, and he desperately needed to find that room.

The hall he was in ended, so he ducked through the nearest doorway. Inside, a Diane clone carefully made incisions on a man plugged into a thought recorder. He was being flayed alive for someone's masochistic viewing pleasure. Palmer wondered how his MeatWorld body was being affected by the virtual knife she cut him with, but before he could complete his thought, the woman pointed her virtual scabbard at him. He wasn't about to stick around and find out if that knife could do damage to his meat-body, but behind him,

guards were closing in. He ducked her initial swing of the knife and ran to the desk, searching for anything of use. Luckily, knives weren't the only thing in her repertoire. In a drawer that would make even the most sadistic dentist shed a tear, Palmer discovered rows upon rows of terrifying metal instruments, each more jagged and serrated than the last. He selected what appeared to be a power drill with a foot-long corkscrew bit and depressed the plunger on the side. It made whining, mechanical growl. He waved it by the face of the clone, and she crept back.

Palmer plunged it into the already tortured man, boring a hole the size of a dime into his abdomen without breaking eye contact with the technician. His screams overpowered the drill's whine. "Where is the server terminal?" he said.

"We don't have one," said the technician. Palmer popped the drill out of the man's abdomen. A cylinder of virtual flesh followed, as did a torrent of red liquid. The cheap simulation caused it to flow slowly in a blocky fashion. He held it to her forehead, pushing deeply enough to create a cut.

"Where is it?" he said, his words coming out staccato.

"Christ, just check your visitor's badge, there's a map!" She backed away and blocked the tortured man with her body, gripping her knife tightly. Of course, it's on the badge. He clicked the button on the back and a map flooded the top right corner of his field of vision. It detected his intended destination and overlaid a waypoint and the fastest route. Drill still in hand, Palmer crept out of the room and followed it down the hall and to the right, where two guards stood.

He charged at them, holding his drill like a disrupter, pointing it directly at the left guard's head while eyeing the one to the right. The left guard, perhaps under the misconception that Palmer was packing heat, leapt out of the way, leaving only the brazen guard on the right. Palmer sprinted and dove, sliding supine across the ground, and tumbling, drill first, into the right guard's kneecap. The guard screamed, more angry than hurt, and kicked him in the head with his good leg. The map in his mind boiled with static for a moment, before his vision returned to normal. Palmer stood, only to hear the soft patter of the other guard as he ran toward him at top speed. He

ducked out of the way, and the guards collided. They collapsed; the attacked guard unable to stand on his now-ruined knee, and his partner folded on top of him. Palmer loomed above the pile of guards and made quick work of them with his drill. The doors and walls were bathed with a light red mist until he looked away, at which point the texture re-rendered and reappeared as normal. He lifted the hand of the guard on top to the biometric scanner by the door and, at last, arrived in the server terminal room.

With an airy swoosh, the door closed behind him, but not before more guards—possibly the first two in fresh avatars—barreled down the hallway toward him. He placed the drill in his inventory, just in case, and with little time to mull over his escape possibilities, Palmer depressed the first button his finger found. His vision flashed white.

Slowly, he regained the ability to see. In his mind's eye, the server's welcome message played: "Welcome to the Bodhisattva server. May the day find you well." Great, he bumbled into some weird new-age world. Around him were cherry trees, with minimally simulated flower buds, mostly rendered as pink blobs, a long winding river that appeared to be the most expensive thing simulated—though as leaves fell from the trees and into the water, they made no ripples and sunk straight down—and a large, blocky, wood and rice paper structure. The appearance of the people inside suggested that this server also offered minimal avatar selection, as each person wore saffron yellow robes and had a shaved head. Upon closer inspection, they were all different people. Nonaugmented, apparently, and with similar taste in garment. They meandered, fist in hand above their navel, somberly down the stairs.

"Big bunch of hacks," said a man next to Palmer.

"Excuse me?"

"These guys, the cue balls. A bunch of hacks who got too deep into Alan Watts in college and left their lives." He laughed to himself. "A bunch of rich assholes who pretend to be monks so they can feel deep. I mean look at this place. Materialism is suffering, but not if it renders your gaudy temple. And that's a Shinto gate, you idiots!"

Wrong religion!" The monks walked through a tall, red archway to the knoll. "Christ."

The man rooted around on the server terminal screen for a little while and Palmer tried to walk away. He found he could not. Though his brain was crying for his feet to move, Palmer found they wouldn't. He was paralyzed.

"Just hold your horses. You're not going anywhere," the man said.

"I didn't even mean to log in. I was just about to leave."

"I'm sure you didn't, but I'm afraid I can't help you. See, you're wanted by at least..." he looked at the computer monitor, "Oh cool, it went up! You're wanted by three different organizations, each with a higher price on your head than the last. Moreover, it seems you have some of my boss' intellectual property, so just go ahead and give it here. Then we can talk."

He typed something on the computer, and Palmer could move his arms. He reached into his jacket to reach for the drill, but as he withdrew it, its menacing drill bit flopped and melted off.

"Not gonna work, sorry," said the man. "That's his property too, but I guess you can keep it; it's just a copy. But I do need that ThoughtCard."

"I don't know what you're--"

"Stop. Just stop. Both of our time is far too valuable to even be debating this. Just hand it over so I don't have to waste an extra two hours to put you in custody."

"You don't get it. I can't. My life is literally at stake. If I don't give this to Dax Sallow by the end of the week, he puts my mind into a void!"

"Well, rest assured, if you don't give that to me now, I'll put your mind into two voids. Or something... Come on, just hand it over. I really don't feel like filing the paperwork if you don't. Just make it easier on both of us."

Palmer didn't move. He couldn't run away, but at least he could resist. The man sighed and typed something into the server terminal. Every item in Palmer's private inventory gushed out in a chaffy stream from within his holographic chest. On the ground, his

items floated as two-dimensional icons in a deagglomerating muss. The man picked up a cerulean square from the pile, adding it to his inventory, and inspected the now fully rendered card.

"This is what you stole? This isn't gonna save your life. This isn't even the right card! The thing's a cheap rip-off! I should know, I helped make it. *Moksha* isn't just a bunch of pretty colors. It's not having ego-death for a few minutes. *Moksha* is the escape, man. You see it once and your life is changed. If this was real *Moksha*, you wouldn't have stolen it, you'd be out here with these guys, not caring you had a few days left to live. I mean, this is like stealing a postcard with the Mona Lisa on it, you know what I mean? This is like... I don't even know, man. This is just pathetic." He closed his fist around it and typed something into the computer with his free hand. His fist collapsed, now empty; the card transported back to the factory server. "You're free to go," he sighed.

"Thanks," Palmer said without emotion. He stood there, weaponless and without his pilferage for a while, not looking at anything, just feeling the artificial sunlight warm his face. He bent down to replace his meager inventory with now timid hands. He hated not having a plan.

"That guy's really gonna kill you if you can't find *Moksha*?"

"That's what he said." Palmer walked back to the server terminal and began to type a destination, but he didn't know where he'd even go. He might as well stay here; these people seem at peace. At least his last week alive would be relaxing. He rounded his shoulders and stepped back as he pulled in a breath of fresh air. A breeze blew his hair. He wondered how many CPU cycles were burned on just that gust.

The man sighed. "Alright. I'll help you."

"You will?"

"Sure, I guess. There's no sense in you dying over a ThoughtCard. And it's not like I'm doing anything here. You're the first person I've had to bounce from this server in I don't know how long. Just, don't come back here looking for more, okay?"

"But you know where to find *Moksha*?"

“Better, I know the programmer. I’m pretty sure they’re making a fresh batch pretty soon. I can pull a few strings and make that today.” He began to type something into the terminal.

~#~

Another flash, and another jolt. The landscape of the new server was just becoming visible to Palmer and the man was already waving for him to keep moving.

“There’s not much time. You’re gonna want to see this.” It was unclear what this server was for, but it looked industrial. There were pipes tracing the surface of most walls. The ceilings were open and overflowing with colorful wires, thick and thin. The man pushed a button on his sleeve; he and Palmer were suddenly aware it was exactly 3:42. Palmer wondered how much the guy who recorded himself as he thought about every minute of the day was paid for his trouble before the man interrupted his train of thought.

“Here we are. Isn’t it beautiful?” It wasn’t. The room they entered was sickly sterile. Every surface smooth and reflective save for the rust-textured pipes suspended at eye level and above their heads in the vaulted ceiling. In the middle, an old man was lying in a bed. His head, a nest of wires that snaked across the flat plane of the ground. The wires lead to a rack of machines covered in glowing lights and dials, situated in a stygian corner of the already dim room. It was hard to tell if the room had walls, or if the shadow kept extending forever like an oppressive black fog. “He’s dying,” the man said.

“Why do you say that?” said Palmer.

“He is. His body, up in the MeatWorld, it’s no longer viable. The machines can’t keep it going any longer, so he chose to stay here in his final moments and slow down time as much as he could. An hour in here is a second up there.”

“And he’s just sleeping?”

“Not at all, he’s meditating. He’s practicing *Sallekhana*—self-starvation to death. The Jains believe it’s the only way to cleanse the soul of attachment. Kinda stupid if you ask me, but to each their own.

But he's close. His body—up there—it's slowing down. His brain is firing less and less. That machine will capture his last thoughts as he dies. That's *Moksha*."

"That's *Moksha*? So what? There's plenty of ThoughtCards of death. Hell, you can buy Mr. Landham's *Megadeath* for 20 credits and die a million times."

"Yeah, but their last thoughts were all about how in pain they were—it's a muddled mess of confusion. 'Why is there a sword in me?', 'Wow burning to death really hurts', 'Suddenly I'm shot'. Not interesting—not to me at least. This guy, he's dying by choice. He's thinking about what it means to be a real thing that exists. He's focused on what changes precisely when that stops being true. This guy can think a thought that's true and false at the same time. He can imagine what it's like to not exist, and he's about to experience how real non-existence is. His mind is the canvas we've been getting our best thoughts from for years and he's been preparing for this day most of his life. So right now, he's just being empty. He's the air in a jar, man. Soon he won't even be that. Imagine the juxtaposition. Imagine trying to amplify that. Have you ever tried amplified emptiness? You can't. Zero times anything is zero. You can't make a room quieter by playing a quiet sound louder. But this guy can think emptiness and he can think it hard."

The man touched his ear for a second. He received some message from above and smiled. The old man disappeared one voxel at a time, off the crinkly, sterile hospital bed which soon followed. The room was empty. All that remained was the recording equipment soaked in the half-shadows, somber in the penumbra of the light bleached room. "He's gone," he said. He walked over to the machine that harvested the dying man's final thoughts and ejected a pristine, platinum ThoughtCard.

He wiped it on his shirt and said, "it's all yours if you want it." Palmer reached for it, but the man pawed his hand away. "But it does come with a price. If you really want it, I'll give it to you, but I think you should try it first"

"Why would I do that?"

"Don't you want to see why they tell stories about this? Don't you want to know why every copy of *Moksha* has been destroyed? Don't you want to make sure I'm not just handing you a copy of 'Sallow's Nude Girlz' and didn't make that whole thing up?"

"I'm not really interested in going insane."

"How do you know you aren't? Your consciousness is in a computer, being fed lies that you're hallucinating as reality."

"But I know what reality is; I know all of that. Shouldn't that make me sane?"

"What is it?"

"What?"

"What is reality? Seems you've got it all figured out, man. I'm all ears."

Palmer didn't really feel like having a Socratic dialogue. Every second in this server felt like a second in some decrepit tomb he could escape if he could just snatch the little square out of the man's hand.

"Reality... it just... it is? I mean it's the thing we're in!"

"But surely this isn't reality. Reality is you sitting in your apartment hooked into whatever this is. You said it yourself! The thing we're in is a computer in Chechnya!" His one ticket back to reality gleamed in the man's closed hand.

"Okay, but that's in reality. My MeatWorld body is in reality."

"Is it? Maybe you're dreaming and your body is up another level. Maybe you fell asleep in the VRscape, and your body is another level above that! The point is we don't know."

Palmer sighed. "Can I just have the ThoughtCard?"

"Are you sure you're sane?"

It wasn't worth the fight. "I guess not."

"If you really believe that, you'll be fine." The man handed it over, and Palmer connected.

His vision flashed white for a second. He felt achy, weak and hungry—so hungry. His eyes were open, but he saw only white. His inner voice was silent. Any sound he heard, he didn't think about. It shook his eardrum and went into his brain but seemed to bypass any sort of semantic processing. Everything was sound without meaning

or association. He felt empty. He had no feeling. He had no thoughts yet realized this was every thought. His simulated body was no different than the simulated room, the boundary was imaginary and his mind filled the room, but his mind was empty. Somehow, its emptiness filled the entirety of the server. He had no sensation, no thoughts.

He sat that way for an indeterminate amount of time until finally, his vision was filled with light again. The light poured through the corners of his eyes growing inward until he saw goggles being removed. The place he found himself in was high fidelity. The visual quality was life-like. His brain was no longer being fed simulated information, but information from the environment. He was back in the MeatWorld. He looked around momentarily but was unable to see a body beneath him. He was only sensation. Again, he removed goggles and ascended another layer, to something beyond the MeatWorld. Here he could comprehend the logic of logic itself. He not only understood that $1=1$ but he understood *why*. The environment was more real than reality, with infinite complexity on every surface.

Every wall was covered in the fractal motion of each atom it was made of and each atom was a universe itself. He took off his goggles again. He took off his goggles again. He took off his goggles again. Each time he removed goggles, he entered a new existence with new rules of logic that only made sense to explain the previous levels. He ascended and ascended to higher and higher realities with more and more complex levels of metalogic until he found himself, his real unsimulated self, sitting in a chair.

He was in his room, his real room. He was Palmer, filled with cables and wires that fed him, plugged into his pod in his MeatWorld VR room. Dax's security team was nowhere to be found. The Thought was either so intense it shocked his mind out of the VRscape, or somehow through ascending levels of reality he ended up back in his own. He wasn't sure. Maybe he was still in there, he couldn't tell. But it didn't really matter; he was no less sure than he was before. He stood up and left.

THRIFT SHOPPING

JOSH AND I WERE AT THE LOCAL THRIFT STORE looking for plastic and a pot we could ruin. For one reason or another, we got it into our heads that tonight we would melt down plastic cups and pour the molten plastic into clay molds. Why we thought this was a good idea is anyone's guess. I can't remember. Josh looked up and down the aisle for suitable, meltable plastic. The kind that was thin enough to melt without burning, but enough of it so we could make a great deal of whatever it was we made. Color was a plus, but we figured it would probably burn away in the oven anyway, so it wasn't a priority.

Across the stained, carpeted floor of the building, I saw Josh looking at a woman squabbling with the cashier over the price of a pillowcase. She yelled and waved her arms in wild gesticulations. I couldn't make out exactly what she was saying but gathered there was a thirty-cent discrepancy between the advertised and actual prices and this lady was no fool. Another, older Korean lady was standing next to a very uncomfortable looking young couple. Like a magician, she withdrew an item from her cart, presented it to them

for approval and replaced it after the couple awkwardly nodded and smiled. I had never seen anyone so excited about two-dollar cutlery. It's no surprise this thrift store was a safe haven for crazy people, I thought as I navigated the aisle specifically reserved for discarded mannequin heads.

Josh joined me in the plastic aisle where I was comparing the prices of their various wares. He found a pretty cheap pot that looked like it could survive the wrath of my hot oven. We were ready to check out and leave.

"Do ya have a phone?" a voice at the end of the aisle asked in a thick northern accent. The voice belonged to a round, old Italian woman. She had hair that was clearly dyed black, and fingernails several inches long. In her shopping cart was small dog. I don't think those are allowed in the store. Her continuing glare indicated she expected a response, so Josh shrugged. He wasn't going to just give his phone to a random stranger. Especially the eerie, old guidette that stood before him.

"Yeah, sure," I said before Josh could make an escape. He glared at me, but it was too late. My phone was already withdrawn. "Do you need to call someone or something?"

"No," the woman said. "But could you look up *La Vietrese Vietri* for me?" This last part she said in a forced Italian accent. She motioned to the plate she was holding with the Italian phrase painted on the back.

"Yeah, okay. *La Vietrese-*"

"*La Vietrese Vietri,*" the woman said again, somehow in a more forced and less authentic accent than before. "It's uh-talian" she said, looking at Josh and waiting for an impressed reaction. He offered none. "I think it's worth some money! I mean look at this! Look at this plate. That looks like, I dunno maybe a boat or something? I think it's the *Santa Maria*!" She relished pronouncing any Italian—though Santa Maria is Spanish—word with drawn out, rolled R's. She pointed to what was indeed a ship painted onto the front of the plate, though it was rather nondescript. It looked more like a fishing dinghy one would find in the Caspian Sea than the regal carrack Columbus sailed from Spain.

just nodded, and said, "Oh. Huh" to appear interested. The lady was craned over me, uncomfortably rubbing her large ham of a shoulder into mine. The sweat of her arm dampened the sleeve of my t-shirt, leaving it slightly darker and yellower than before.

"Oh! Would you look at that! Click view more!" She said when she saw the search results. Her long, curling nails tapped against my phone screen in vain. It turned out *La Vietrese Vietri* was a commercial ceramics company. "I think it's worth some money!" she repeated. Curiously, she only wanted to look at the image results of other stoneware from the company, not prices. She was so convinced by how beautiful they looked, she was certain she would flip this plate online for a large price tag.

"I make six figyahs. *Six figyahs*. That's more than my husband!" she explained. From her bare ring finger, I was pretty sure she was either lying to us, or to her husband about her fidelity.

"Hmm, uh huh, uh huh." I crept a small step away from her.

"Well, I'm glad we could help!" Josh said with a forced smile. Thank god. I could put my phone away and flee. We looked at each other with raised eyebrows and sucked our teeth as we made their way to the bored-looking cashier. "Hello, I'm Joy!" her name tag read. Her facial piercings pulled together to form a scowl.

"Christ, I have to learn to say no sometimes," I said as Joy scanned the items.

"I know. I mean, I didn't want to be a dick but... come on!"

We collected our things and walked past a woman pulling a moist twenty from her bra to pay Joy. Thank god I don't work here.

We exited the store into the humid darkness of the parking lot. Distant lights zoomed past on the road ahead. A homeless man shambled down the sidewalk ahead of us, his silhouette a hole in the foggy, gloam air. We made our way to Josh's car, but as we approached, a voice cut through the darkness.

"Hey! Hey! I need yah help!" The voice twanged with a heavy northern accent. Before we could even see her, we knew it was the crazy lady. She approached with a bulging, oversized trash bag of used items in one hand, and her small dog in the other.

"Guys, do you think you can give me a ride?" She didn't wait for a response and simply entered the car. It sunk down at least a foot on the passenger side. She rolled down the window. "I'll give you a hundred dollahs. I don't live too fah." I looked at Josh and shrugged. We didn't really have another option. The old woman was wedged so deeply into Josh's car, it would be more effort than it was worth to try to pry her out.

We sat in our respective seats and Josh started the engine.

"Thank *gawd* you boys saw me! I don't know how I woulda got home! Every taxicab has me on a blacklist. Can you believe that? Every single one. I swear I didn't do anything to deserve it. The nerve! And my useless son? Don't even get me stahted. I can't, I don't even want to talk about it." She began to talk about her son until Josh interrupted her.

"Where did you say you lived again?"

"Oh, just get on 495 West and I'll let you know when to get off. So anyway, do you know what I just got?"

"A plate?" I chimed in.

"Ohh! You were the boys who let me use your phone earlier! How could I forget! No, no not the plate. Well, yes, I did get the plate also, but that's not what I mean. No, no. I bought a patent for these biodegradable—that means they decompose in the ocean—nets that are safe for human consumption. And people can use them to catch fish! I know, I know. How did I snatch that up? Well, I was just looking at the patent website—I collect fish-related patents you know—and I just saw it! How neat is that? I still have to figure out how to mass produce them, but once I do, you better believe you'll be seeing them everywhere! A net you can eat! Who woulda thought?"

"Fish-related patents?" was all Josh could manage.

"Oh yes, I've got patents on poles and aquariums and all sorts of things. Why the other day I was down at the ocean, you know the Atlantic one? Anyway—"

The conversation was as endless as the ride to her house. Every sentence that came out of this woman's mouth droller than the last. She started the evening by telling us about her vocation of

flipping things (patents or otherwise) online, but she had now moved on telling us of her, rather unimpressive, travels.

She spoke of Tennessee the way a pith helmeted explorer would write about Africa, Richmond like the misty Orient. She was in the middle of a rather drawn-out tale about thrifting in Phoenix when she suddenly drew in close. Close enough that the tip of her nose invaded my ear. "Have you boys ever heard of a clay eatah?" Her eyes became sullen. Her face fell. The tone of her voice suggested urgency, and fear.

"What the fuck is she talking about," Josh murmured through his teeth. He gripped the steering wheel tighter.

"When I was in Louisiana," she said in a thanatoid whisper, "I went to an estate sale. Of course, you know me, I snatched up this and that. I got a pretty good return on a watch I found actually, 35 karat gold if you can believe it."

I couldn't.

"But the lady who died was this voodoo witch doctah. Voodoo, like the dolls, you know. And she had all sorts of spellcastin' equipment. I mean she had sacred herbs, and a flute even! A flute? I mean really. But the one thing I couldn't take my eyes off of was this little statue. Now, I'm no dummy. I didn't get my associates degree in anthropology for nothin', so I immediately knew this statue had some sort of religious significance. So, what else could I do? I bought it for six dollahs! Can you believe it? Six dollahs for a priceless artifact? Anyway, I could never sell it, so it lives in my house now. It was the deal of a lifetime! Oh, take this exit! I'm the first house on the right."

Josh did so, and we pulled up to a small suburban home. Her lawn was adorned with countless second-hand lawn decorations, each tackier than the last. She picked up her dog, who had been resting peacefully on her lap, with enough force for the puppy to pull Gs usually reserved for fighter pilots. She picked up her large sack of wares, like a strange Jersey Shore Santa Claus, and without so much as a "thanks," kicked the door shut with her trollish foot.

Josh and I sat in stunned silence for a moment.

"Didn't she say she'd give you a hundred dollars?" I asked.

"Not having to talk to her again is worth every penny," Josh said. He began fumbling with his GPS to get us home. Through her window I watched the cheap witch unpack her kitschy items and unwind. She poured herself a glass of wine and sat in what I assumed was her living room. With great zeal, she withdrew the plate from her giant sack of items and held it up to inspect it. She looked very pleased with herself. I watched as her arm stretched just past where I could see through the window and she flinched in fear. Tremors jiggled through every ounce of her sagging arm skin, and when her hand cocked back, the plate had what seemed like a monstrously large bite mark in it. I jumped in my seat.

"What the hell? Did you see that?" I asked Josh.

He looked up from his GPS. "See what?"

"Look in the window!" Again, she moved her arm just out of sight of the window and again she jumped, revealing now a third of the plate, cut on the edges by serrated marks.

"What the hell?" Josh said. He put his GPS down and opened the car door.

"Are you crazy? What are you doing?"

"Don't you want to see what she has that's *eating a plate*?" I couldn't argue with his logic, so I followed.

We stalked through the unkempt jungle that surrounded her house in silence, save for the wispy sounds of grass dragging at our feet. Josh crept up to the window and peered through. Warm light washed over his face as it changed from an expression of bemused cynicism to absolute bewilderment. I followed his gaze to a large clay statue that stood on a dark, wooden coffee table. At first, I thought it was simply the dance of the shadows as they played across its oddly human face, but the longer I looked, the more I was convinced that the statue was moving. The idol was deep brown clay that looked still wet. It stood atop two mounds, that I suppose the sculptor intended to be its feet, but they looked more like balls of clay smooshed at the last second onto its base. Its face was devoid of any detail. It simply had two holes for eyes, and a large gash that unzipped its head horizontally in a macabre parody of a mouth. I couldn't see any teeth, but I could hear the crunching sounds of ceramic being chewed.

Once again, the woman held out her timid arm to the hungry totem and lurched back in fear as it finished off her *La Vietrese Vietri*. Tremors of anxiety shook through her cellulite dimpled arms until suddenly she was calm. The statue's chest erupted into spindling clay tendrils that wound around both of her arms snaking their way up to her shoulders. A look of peace settled on her face and the tendrils burrowed into her arms, slipping into her veins. She melted in ecstasy and fell to the floor. The statue's slender tentacles unwound from the woman and assimilated back into its nondescript clay chest. The statue didn't move.

"What was that?" Josh hissed.

"I think that was the 'voodoo' thing she was rambling about in the car."

Josh stared through the window, his eyes glazed over, lost in thought. We stood now fully upright, staring at the woman collapsed on the floor. Every few seconds she opened her eyes, but not long enough to return to lucidity. Each time, she closed them again, settling her head back on the ground in a small smile that showed mostly in her crows' feet-wrinkled eyes.

"I'm gonna take it," Josh said, finally.

"What?"

"Look, she clearly got high or something off of what it did to her, plus don't you think it'd be cool to have a clay golem or whatever the hell that thing is?"

I didn't respond. This was a bad idea.

"Look, we'll just take it for a little while. If we don't want it, we just drop it right back here. She'll never know it was us! Not to mention, she owes me a hundred dollars."

"Alright." I still didn't like this plan, but it seemed worth it if we could avenge his wallet.

As luck would have it, the crazy lady left her window unlocked, so stealing her statue was a simple matter of stepping through and grabbing it. We were weary to approach it at first, but it didn't seem to be moving anymore. In fact, the clay was totally hardened as if it had been glazed and thrown in the kiln god knows how long ago. Was it possible we just imagined everything? I wanted

to believe this version of reality but stepping over a woman drifting in and out of consciousness like she was nodding on heroin made it hard to reconcile.

Not wanting to touch the thing, Josh dumped out her gargantuan thrift store shopping bag, and grabbed it through the plastic as if he the statue was a dog turd left on someone's lawn. He lifted with his knees—the statue must have been heavier than it looked—and made his way toward the window. I followed as he hopped out, and we made the trek back to his car. Our feet sifted through the high grass, carefully avoiding the various lawn ornaments, seen and unseen within the unkempt field until we arrived and sped away.

We pulled up to my apartment after a long, silent drive. Josh turned off the car's purring engine and we sat for a moment.

"What was the point of that," I said, breaking the silence.

"I can't explain it; I just really wanted the golem. I don't know why, but if what we saw was real, to me, it's worth far more than \$100."

I scoffed and opened the car door. Whatever, if this was just vengeance for the lady treating us like garbage that was one thing, but if this statue, the golem as he kept calling it, was really alive, I didn't want anything to do with it. Josh carried the bag with him as we walked to my place, and I could see the excitement spreading across his face.

"Do you have any plates you don't want?" he asked when we finally arrived inside. Without really wanting to, I opened the cabinet and handed him a small clay plate. It was just a cheap little white one that came in a pack of ten and it was already cracked so I didn't really care what happened to it.

Josh dumped the statue onto the carpet in the other room. It made a loud thump as it hit the floor but didn't sound tinny and hollow. Rather, it sounded wet and heavy. I didn't like it one bit. He grabbed the plate out of my hand and held it in front of the thing. The statue's dead eyeholes trained on the plate for a while, but nothing changed. Josh's face fell. He began putting his arm down when

suddenly a loud crunch crackled through the air. We both looked at Josh's hand and to our surprise, the plate was mostly swallowed by the thing. Its surface looked a little wetter, but still not malleable. I wouldn't be surprised if it was moist to the touch, the way skin feels on a humid day.

"Another one," said Josh. "I need another plate!" He was growing more and more manic. Entranced and clouded by the surrealness, I reemerged from the kitchen with a full stack of plates: every one I owned. It felt like making a Faustian bargain, but I wanted to see how far this would go.

Josh continued to feed the thing. Plate after plate vanished into its imperceptible gullet. With each plate it devoured, its surface softened. I could see barbs like those on a crab begin to emerge from its shoulders and arms as it transformed from a mostly shapeless hominid blob to a horrific clay arthropod. Once again, sinewy clay tendrils emerged from its chest and reached as far as they could toward Josh.

"Okay Josh I think you should stop", but it was too late. He was hypnotized, lost in that thing's empty eyes. It was like he didn't even hear me. He just continued to hold plates to its mouth and watch as it chomped them down until the tendrils pierced his arms and dug into his veins. Upon breaking his skin, he immediately doubled over and crumpled into a heap on the floor. He rolled and writhed in a fit of pleasure from whatever sick chemical that thing rewards its feeders with. By this point, I had enough, so I kicked the statue hard. But instead of spreading across the room in a cloud of shattered clay, my foot sunk in deep. With a wet *plop* I pulled my foot out to try again, but the hole seemed to fill itself. I knew there was nothing I could do to it in this state. Wet clay can't be shattered. So, I sat there and watched. What else could I do? I made sure Josh didn't have a seizure, or overdose on whatever the statue used on him and I watched the statue begin to dry. It cracked a little as the moisture sublimated back into the atmosphere, and after a long while, it appeared like any other piece of fired clay.

Again, I tried to destroy it. I wanted to throw it out my window to smash on the sidewalk below. But as I lunged for it, Josh once again became lucid.

"No! You can't hurt it!" he begged.

"This thing is fucked up," I said. "It's not right. We have to get rid of it, man."

"You will not touch it!" He sat up straight. "I won't allow it."

"I don't want it in my house. This *thing* is evil."

"You're an idiot!" Josh said. He stood up and grabbed the statue. "You know what, I'll take it out. But not because you want it out of your house, because you don't deserve it in your house".

"Fine by me! Get that thing the hell out! You'd break it while you still could if you thought about it for even a fucking second!" But he just flicked me off and walked out the door with the statue.

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It had been a few weeks and I hadn't seen Josh since the night he left my dinky apartment in a huff. I repeatedly texted him, called him and emailed him to no avail. It was like he just vanished off the face of the earth. He had either gone completely off the grid, or blocked me on every platform, electronic or otherwise. I was annoyed, but not altogether surprised. He'd get over it. I just couldn't stand that thing in my house anymore. I didn't like what it did to him, and I sure as hell wasn't going to try my luck with whatever evil it put into his veins.

My phone buzzed, and I was hoping it was Josh. I hoped to read an explanation of his disappearance, or maybe even an apology, but I didn't hold my breath. It ended up just being a reminder of a work thing I had to go to. Even worse, it was upscale. Some nonsense about a coworker celebrating their promotion at a nice restaurant. I wouldn't normally go to these kinds of things, but my bosses recently found out I had been using a not insignificant amount of company time working on my novel. I was one mistake away from being fired (and one chapter away from finishing my manuscript) so I had to go. I opened my closet and had the upsetting realization that I didn't own

a single tie. Well, I had some ties, but I couldn't imagine my dungeons and dragons, or sexy anime girl ties would be acceptable business-casual attire. Screw it, I'll just go to the thrift store and grab something on the way.

I got to the store and clambered to the tie section. I found something tasteful, but not too droll and sprinted toward registers. I was greeted by a long, serpentine line that sprawled almost to the back wall. Even worse, the guy in front of me was chatty. He was rambling to the person in front of him about something or other and it was clear from the thousand-yard stare of his victim that she couldn't care less. The chatty gentleman was wearing a blaze orange sun hat with green tinted sports glasses resting on the brim facing me. His camouflage shirt was draped with a khaki vest that appeared so loaded with gear I assumed the man was either returning from or on his way to an Amazonian expedition.

He turned around, and to my horror, the face enshrouded in tacky attire belonged to Josh.

"Well hey there, stranger!" he said. "Hey, can I ask you somethin'?"

I didn't respond.

"Let me ask you this," he held up a tattered golf bag. "Now, I myself don't golf, but I've been thinking of starting, and wouldn't you know it, these guys had a set I just couldn't not buy! So, my question," he chuckled to himself, seemingly without reason, "is what do you think of this set-a-clubs?"

"I uh... Josh, are you okay?"

"Can I borrow your phone? I just wanna look up this brand of golf clubs!"

"What's going on? Where have you been?"

Josh didn't answer and instead snatched my phone and searched for the brand name of golf bag he was about to buy.

"Oh! I knew it! These are worth some money, I think! Ooo did I tell you about the last thing I bought here?"

"Do you mean two weeks ago when we got the pot?"

"No, no, no! I mean yesterday. You have to come

every day to scope out the deals you know. Yesterday I was in here, and I bought a pair of—get this—ballistic underwear! Ballistic means bulletproof by the way, so now I can walk around town without fear of gettin' shot in the ass!" He erupted into a fit of laughter. He was one of them now—a thrifter. I panicked. I backed out of line, threw down the tie and ran to the door. In my haphazard state, I nearly slammed into an older shopper.

"Watch where yah goin!" She said in a heavy northern accent. It was the crazy lady. I'm sure it was the crazy lady, but she looked so different. Her dog was nowhere to be seen, and in her hand was only a sensible looking scarf, a far cry from the overloaded shopping cart she had last time. She had a youthful glow to her, and her long, cat-like fingernails had been shorn. She was normal. She smiled.

THE CIVIL DISOBEDIENCE CLUB

“YOU CAN’T BE SERIOUS,” Emma said. “How is that going to help anything?”

“We’re standing in solidarity,” said Addy. “We’re standing silently with those who cannot speak. Now, are you with us or against us?”

“I’m not against you. I’m just... I mean what’s the point? You understand the Chinese government doesn’t care what a bunch of affluent, American high schoolers do right? I’ll stand with you, but only if you admit that covering your mouth with duct tape does nothing to free Tibet.”

“I can *not* believe you would say something like that! You know what? I think you should leave.”

“Fine! Maybe I will. Maybe I’ll go do something to actually help the Tibetans! You just organized this to get out of your public speaking project!”

Addy gasped and tried to protest, but Emmy had already left the band room. She wasn't sure what she expected when Addy had asked her to join the Civil Disobedience Club. She came out to support her friend, but every meeting seemed less and less about helping the world, and more about making a grand display that ultimately did nothing. Every "protest" Addy organized seemed to be an increasingly elaborate way to get out of some assignment under the guise of the first amendment.

Last month, to raise awareness about human trafficking in Togo, everyone in the Civil Disobedience Club bound their hands for a week. Did this allow Addy to get out of the badminton unit in PE? Sure, but did anyone in Togo stop the sale of children? Not according to the Human Trafficking Watch Group. The month before that, in order to help child soldiers in Sierra Leone, she subjected the whole school to a horrible video of a child getting a Master Lock pushed through his lips so he physically couldn't talk to journalists. It seemed counterintuitive to Emma that they sent such a clip to a group of journalists but maybe thoughts like that were why they had an army of children and she could hardly keep her babysitting service afloat. Everyone got out of class for the assembly Addy had organized to screen the video, but as far as Emma knew Joseph Kony was still at large.

She would show her. Emma would find some way to actually help Tibet. She didn't know any Tibetan refugees, or Chinese people for that matter, but this wasn't really about Tibet, this was about spite. Emma couldn't point to Tibet on a map, but luckily, she had an internet connection and a grudge. When she got home from school that day, it wasn't hard to find several humanitarian organizations for her cause. She finally settled upon an organization that seemed transparent enough. It had good ratings compared to others, and even a focus on Tibet. It seemed like this group could actually aid Tibetan refugees—unlike some activists she knew. She made a few simple posters and planned a fundraiser the next day. It seemed like everything was in place to really do some good, so Emma went to bed content.

The next day, she hung her posters all around school. "Free Tibet Bake Sale! Your donation could help save the Dalai Lama!" they read. Her phone began lighting up with interest from students willing to help, but in the flurry of texts, the only one she noticed was from Addy.

"You should feel ashamed," the green bubble on her phone's screen told her. She didn't. In fact, she knew she would receive hatred. Charitable organizations are always subject to scorn. But you know what? She didn't care. She didn't give two hot shits about what Addy thought because she was now the face of change in the school. She may not free Tibet, but she would definitely embarrass Addy in front of everyone, and really, isn't that what charity is all about?

When the final bell rang, Emma made her way down the hallway, catching not a few high fives from her friends. Her other hand dragged a purple, plastic chair in tow. Its feet emitted a little rubber snail-trail as it scraped across the ground. Upon completing her hero's sojourn from the classroom, she positioned her chair by the front door. Her herculean task begun, she stood upon the chair and solicited as she never had before.

"Free Tibet!" she yelled. "Treats for treatises! Rhubarb for reform! Let Buddhists live in peace and sell your sweet raised yeast!" She had been thinking of catchy slogans all night and couldn't settle upon just one.

"You there!" she called at an unsuspecting freshman. "Do you hate peace?"

The freshman looked hurt as she gazed up at her through her bangs. "No, of course not. I did mission work in Vietna--"

"Then why isn't your name on my list?" Emma interrupted. "Why won't you bake cookies for the Dalai Lama?"

The freshman shrugged. "Don't Buddhists like, not eat or something?"

"Of course they do! You're thinking of Muslims! But the cupcakes aren't for the Buddhists. They're to raise money in support of them! Buddhists have been saying it since Siddhartha was enlightened: they need more money! Now will you sell something at the bake sale, or do you support sweatshops?"

With trembling hands, the girl scratched her name and a promise of a dozen snickerdoodles onto the sheet. She pushed it back to Emma and mumbled something about being late for her bus before she vanished back into the crowd. Like a skilled fisherman, vociferations on her hook, she cast her cries into the sea of people, only to reel in endless promises of doughy delicacies. She was a siren, and her peers crashed into the rocks of baking duty when they heard her sweet song. No one could resist.

As the flow of students ebbed and the busses shuttled away, Emma sat in her plastic throne in a dreamy haze. She flipped through her clipboard, heavy with the signatures of eager revolutionaries. Her beady eyes preened over her excellent work. Even Veronica, a known bitch, promised she would bring some vegan treats. She kept reading and re-reading the sign-up sheet; its every intricate cursive name tickled her mind like a sacred incantation. Each new line inflated her with pride. Emma began to tabulate how much money this sale could actually make. It wasn't enough to free Tibet, but with any luck they could raise their GDP by 3%. She was right in the middle of converting dollars to Renminbi, when a shadow eclipsed her paper and pulled her back to reality.

"I know what you're doing," the shadow's mucous voice said. Emma looked up only to see Jessica's almost-straight bangs. It was hard to make eye contact with someone who insisted on cutting their own hair, especially when it was done so poorly. Her hairline looked like the Dow Jones.

"You think your grades are more important than thousands of peaceful Buddhist monks," the owner of the coarse, crusty bangs continued.

"What?"

"You heard me. Look, you can be a total spaz and do your little bake sale, but we all know it's just so your COMM grade doesn't tank."

Emma gritted her teeth. "My COMM grade is fine." She spit each word out one at a time hoping they would hit her like poison darts.

Jessica was unconvinced. "If you really wanted to help the people of Tibet, you wouldn't be giving them money. Buddhists hate that. You're nothing but a slactivist."

"Either sign up to donate or get the hell away from my table."

"Wouldn't you like that?" She slapped the clipboard out of Emma's hands. This is probably how Nelson Mandela felt.

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With the receipt for her first UNICEF donation in hand, Emma bounded to the band room. Day one of the bake sale was an unrivaled success and before kicking off day two, she wanted to pay Addy a little visit. She burst through the double doors and scanned the room. She saw an archipelago of bobs dyed pink and purple, one of which belonged to Addy, who at present, was gingerly affixing tape to the mouth of a freshman. Upon Emma's invasion, each empurpled head snapped to the source of the bedlam, every mouth taped shut.

"Well," Emma said, "isn't this interesting." She strode between two cowering sophomores to wave her receipt a little too close to Addy's eyes. "While you were in here screwing around with your duct tape and self-righteousness, I was out saving Tibet." She began to pace around the room with great mirth. Her every bounce radiated vainglorious fervor. "What's the matter? At a loss for words?"

Addy glared at her and mumbled something through her self-adhered gag.

"What was that?" Emma ripped the tape from Addy's lips.

"I said, Tibet still isn't free. You haven't accomplished anything."

"I raised almost three-thousand dollars for them yesterday! What have you done? Sat quietly? That didn't free them either."

"How is your money going to help?"

"Money can buy... I don't know! It's something measurable! I gave them something! You aren't doing anything. The only difference between today, and any other day, is fewer people will learn to hate you because the duct tape seals the bullshit in"

With eyes wet but refusing to cry Addy furrowed her brow and rose from her seat. Her now imposing figure craned over Emma's. For a second, she thought Addy would hit her, but no such luck. She would have to be a martyr some other time. Unexpectedly stoic, Addy simply said, "Why don't you just leave. We have work to do, and we don't need you distracting us with your laziness and greed."

Emma tried to protest, but before she could, she was met with an ambush of Addy's goons. What seemed like a hundred freshmen with varicolored short hair came seemingly from the shadows to push her out of the room in a great gust of human motion. Forced into the locker lined halls, the door slammed in front of her after the last of Addy's henchmen slithered silently back to their chambers. Screw them, Emma thought.

When she returned to the school's entrance, Emma was greeted by her aids who had just finished setting up the tables for the morning's "Buddhist Breakfast Bread Bazaar". Students drifted through the rows of tables, digging in their pockets for nickels to buy breakfast pastries. From a distant table, there was a minor commotion. A Junior was upset with the quality of the bread she had just purchased. It didn't really matter; the bake sale already had her money. At the dessert table Emma watched as a gaggle of sophomores searched their purses and backpacks for anything even vaguely pecuniary. They tried to offer up watches and rings for cookies, but Emma's staff were well trained. They knew to deny these vultures. People like these girls only wanted treats. They weren't thinking about the greater task at hand. She wagered that these girls didn't even know this was a charitable bake sale and just wanted sugary bread! As long as their money was green Emma would take it, but these girls were trying to barter with hair ties and Starbucks gift cards. It's a shame they care so little for the Tibetans.

"Hey." Emma turned around. The shrill, popping voice belonged to the girl from yesterday. "Tibet still isn't free."

Emma smirked, "obviously they aren't free-"

"So, you're admitting that this is all for nothing?"

"No, this isn't all for nothing. They aren't going to be free overnight. We're helping, but we can't free Tibet on our own, its--"

"What? This bake sale won't free Tibet? So, you're basically stealing from these people? Hey!" she yelled, drawing the attention of the nearby shoppers. "This girl is stealing from you!"

"Shut up, I am not. Why don't you leave my bake sale? You clearly don't want to give to Tibet, so why don't you just go?"

The girl glared at her, and did, eventually leave, flicking Emma off as she did so.

Emma paid her no mind, and continued to survey her kingdom, belauding herself. She noticed a great crowd forming toward the end of the hallway. She was excited; they must have lots of money. She approached the crowd, hands raised in the warm gesture of good will, and said, "Ladies, I assure you there are enough cookies and cakes for everyone! Thanks for making this bake sale such a success!" Her excitement welled until she noticed that girl, the one with the bad bangs, standing in the crowd.

"There she is!" someone in the crowd said. One of her aids rushed to Emma's side.

"They are not happy," she whispered frantically to Emma.

"What? Why? I told them; change doesn't just happen overnight!"

"It's not that. Well... Okay that doesn't help. But what charity did you donate to again?"

"UNICEF. Why does that matter?" The crowd began to encircle her. A ring of angry faces undulated in her field of view.

"You're a criminal!" someone shouted.

"I want my money back!" said someone else.

"Jessica, what the hell is going on?" Emma asked her aid again.

"Well... okay so, apparently UNICEF was bought out by someone a few years ago... an African warlord... so... in a way... well, Emma, some people think... some people feel like you donated everyone's money to fund child soldiers."

"What?" Emma roared.

"I told you it was bad!" Jessica ran off, leaving Emma alone to face the mob.

"Ladies, ladies!", Emma began. "I assure you this is some sort of mistake. Your money is going to the poor people of Tibet and their weary government. What more could you ask for?"

"You're a liar!" said a voice in the mob.

"You knew this would happen!"

"You gave to Joseph Kony on purpose!"

"Everyone knows UNICEF is evil!"

The angry jeers wouldn't stop. The crowd engulfed her like heavy smog and swarmed through the tables. Emma's aids were nowhere to be found. The receipt for her donation was ripped from her hand by a furious peer and torn to pieces for reasons unknown. Tables were ransacked. Nausiaphonic mastication filled the air as breads vanished from the tables and formerly pristine plastic wrapping floated to the tile and landed in weeps and sighs. In the commotion, tables were scraped across the floor and flipped over completely. One table, atop which sat a metal box that housed the Tibetan tithes, was pushed over in a contest between two girls to grab the only box of snickerdoodles that sat exquisitely packaged, nestled beneath the table. When the triumphant victor claimed her pilfered prize, she rose too quickly and crashed her head into wood above her. The cashbox, as well as everything else on the table's surface careened down the hall. The box unhinged and released a shower of coins that skittered away—more pelf for the animals invading the bake sale.

Amidst the madness, Emma sat under a table hugging her knees. Why was she being punished for doing something good? She thought she was making a difference! Maybe not a big one, but a bigger one than whatever being quiet all day would solve. And was it really her fault that African warlords somehow infiltrated UNICEF? It's not like she wanted to fund child soldiers. It wasn't her intention to do that at least, doesn't that count for anything? All she wanted was a nice, quiet, bake sale and she couldn't even have that without child soldiers ruining it for her.

While Emma was sulking in the ruins of her eleemosynary emporium, she saw a man enter the school. He wasn't tall, but he was

imposing nonetheless, and he looked oddly familiar. Maybe he was somebody's father. Surrounding him was an entourage of security guards, all with striking Asian features. They were murmuring in a hushed language, that Emma didn't recognize, but incorrectly guessed was "Chinese". They were walking to the school's head office, but suddenly froze. Addy and the rest of the civil disobedience club stood in a triumphant row, linking arms as the peculiar group of men stared in confusion. The group of men tried to get around their impromptu picket line, but to no avail. One of the men inspected the inscription on Addy's duct tape. It read "Free Tibet". He whispered something to the important looking fellow in the middle. The stout man grunted.

"Move out of the way", he coughed out. "We get in a lot of trouble if we don't sign in."

His security guards nodded in agreement.

"Mhhmf MHHMF!", Addy repeated. She gesticulated wildly at the tape that shrouded her mouth and bore her plea.

One of the important looking men's guards whispered once more to leader and he smacked his forehead. A look of genuine remorse broke across his face. He yelled what sounded like only vowels at a tall, slender individual with wispy hair.

"I had no idea you kids wanted peace in Tibet so badly!" the man, evidently a translator told them. "If I had known the pain we were causing, we would have never occupied it." Emma thought that maybe the sarcasm was lost in translation until the man added, "As the standing Honorable Chairman of the People's Republic of China, I hereby declare Tibet's freedom!"

Addy ripped the duct tape off of her mouth. "Yes! I knew we could do it guys!" The whole Civil Disobedience Club erupted into celebration. They danced and cheered and high fived. The Honorable Chairman wept. It would be confirmed later on the news, and again by the Dalai Lama's Twitter account that China had indeed ceased all violent relations with Tibet. They were officially a sovereign nation with talks of joining the UN. The occupation was finally over. Emma sat down, surrounded by unsold pastries, reminders of the unused dollars given to UNICEF. Addy had actually changed something.

Somehow, Addy had managed to enact change of real value. Emma wanted to cry until she remembered—at least the bake sale got her out of math class.

THE BUCKET

THE AIR OUTSIDE WAS CRISP AND DRY. It felt good. Max took a deep breath of oxygen, secular and unpolluted by incense as he found his shoes on the wooden rack outside the temple.

“Have a good night, Max!” Mr. Verma called out as he was enveloped into the cool night air. He wished he could. His head was still foggy. Even moments after leaving, he could feel the boring monotony of his life reassembling. Going to these things was certainly different—it was something to do at least—but just adding more scheduled meetings to his little agenda book didn’t feel like adding purpose. These people, as nice as they were, still only existed to him behind the tall oak doors of the temple.

For a while now, the uncanny feeling that his life was some unending cycle had been creeping into Max’s mind. Each day was the same, just another loop in the cosmic whirlpool of samsara. Except, instead of dying, every day he fell asleep and was born anew into the same, boring life. Attending various temples of different faiths was just the most recent attempt at escapism. Before that he tried his hand

at committing small crimes. Nothing major, just stealing mail and various unattended bags. He never saw any sort of repercussions, so he assumed there were none. The first time, he found a huge envelope crammed halfway under a door at his office. It looked more interesting than whatever paperwork he'd have to read in his cubicle, so he took it. When he opened it and found it was not money, he nearly threw it away outright. Nevertheless, he felt a curious niggling to read it.

"To whom it may concern," it read. "The fire escapes on the South building in the Allister Complex are no longer operational. Unless the Allister company begins an immediate solution, the following parties will be filing a class-action suit..." He couldn't put it down. He needed more. Strangers' monotonous problems fascinated him. It was somehow validating to peek in on a *tête-à-tête*; it felt like he was making these people real. Knowledge of these strangers' minute squabbings gave them meaning, like those bodies people find in ancient Roman rubble. They probably weren't important, or even well known in their day, but just by finding them, humanity has collectively given them purpose. The detail that problems important enough for an epistle probably needed to be addressed was not lost on him, but the repercussions were always shrouded. Hidden by the dense fog of strangers that shambled through the world.

Reading strangers' letters was one thing, but listening to large groups commune about the state of their souls was another. The first time he went to a Sikh temple, it was for the free dinner, but after listening to them describe their guilt, their fears that they were not righteous enough, he craved more. He needed their pain daily. Infatuated by the endless, anonymous waves of faces he saw in temples, he kept coming back. But the commute to a different religious building every day of the week was beginning to feel the same as his commute to work.

Tonight's sermon, if you can call it that, was at the local temple to Durga. It was about the Brahman—the eternal, all-pervading reality everything exists upon- within- is- whatever. The temple goers who wished to attend Mr. Verma's lecture all sat around the brightly colored room under a cloud of sweet-smelling smoke.

Max shifted around, trying to find the most comfortable part of his metal folding chair as a blue-faced, polymanual deity glared at him from a nearby mural. Mr. Verma spoke.

“A child once asked his father, ‘what is the true nature of reality? Am I my sensations? My body? My mind?’ His father, a wise sage, took a pinch of salt and dissolved it into a glass of water. He said, ‘you are that’.”

The meeting continued normally, if a little lacking in *schadenfreude*, until Mr. Verma finally concluded with a song and an invitation to make an offering to Durga. Max did not. He finished lacing his shoes outside, and a ringing bell cut through the night. The high-pitched clang was occasionally syncopated with the dull clanks of coins hitting plastic. He didn’t think it was someone ringing the *ghanta*. He didn’t see anyone coming in the temple after him anyway, and those rings were usually followed by some utterance in a language he didn’t understand. An elderly man whose back looked like a gnarled vine stood at the bottom of the stoop, bell in hand, with a little red bucket. Temple goers walking to their cars dropped in what little they hadn’t already offered to the *murtis*. As if ashamed for him, the people never looked the man in the eye. He was totally invisible to them, and yet undeniably present.

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The next day at work, upon concluding his two o’clock zazen in the septic sepulcher, Max walked down the bleak, desaturated hallway to his sullen cubical. The hall was trypolated with large wooden doors: behind each one, a better job, a more interesting life. Each door hid a world he could never know populated by people he would never see. If one day, even today, if every office other than his was empty, he would have no way of knowing and really, would it matter?

A red envelope peeked from under one of the anonymous doors—a call from the distant world beyond the wall. Prisoners in solitary confinement slipped notes into the spines of the books they were allowed to read, messages in bottles to be studied by persons

unknown. Some prisoners taught themselves Morse Code so they could knock on the pipes. Anything to feel the presence of others, desperate to confirm they weren't the only conscious being. If they can't, prisoners just invent other minds of their own. A new consciousness to keep their old one company. Are they crazy to want someone to talk to? Max picked up the letter; the voices in his head came from other people's mail. Normally, he would tremble with anticipation to read the forbidden spoils of mail fraud. He savored every moment. But now, as he inspected the crimson envelope, he felt no such unction. Anhedonic, he dropped it and left.

His mind kept drifting back to the man with the bucket last night. No one asked him his credentials. On the contrary, no one even looked at him. Moreover, donors continued their conversations near oblivious to his presence at all. He had a bird's eye view into those people's real lives. In church, people were self-conscious, in letters, people are aware they are writing to a faceless organization, but at the bucket, they were completely unaware of the invisible mind hidden in plain sight that listened in. People only speak freely when they think they're alone.

After work that day, Max skipped temple. He was sure he wouldn't be missed, and as far as he was concerned, the people with Rabbi Edel didn't exist if he wasn't there to see them. The evening was algid and eerie. Electricity coursed through Max's veins. On his way, he purchased a nice ten-gallon bucket, a bell, and a tripod. He drove to the city and got straight to work. Stationed outside a general store in Camden, he quickly set up and clanged the bell like a siren's song.

When Max was in elementary school, kids used to tell fables about the tautological evil of this place. One kid, recounting a tall tale from his older brother, claimed gang members made it a game to see how many little white boys' penises they could cut off. Another kid, detailing yet another *fabella fratris*, claimed every woman who lived here was a prostitute. It was like, a civic code or something. Now, as he stood under the dingy streetlight, backlit by the vacant, flickering light of the store, Max was elated.

Torrents of anonymous pedestrians emerged from their hidden lives to leave a furtive coin in his little red bucket. Their faces showed a sincere compunction, a tacit longing that their outwardly affectless alms could buy their freedom from some sin. They didn't really think about where the money was going, so why should Max tell them? On the rare occasions anyone asked, he shrugged, "a good cause."

The relief on these strangers' faces as they purchased an indulgence from whatever secret evil they had committed was all that mattered. Some people simply had spare change and figured donating it to the bucket was better than giving it to a homeless man. But a choice few held pained expressions, faces that were hard and worn, faces hatched with crows' feet, pocked with scars. These were the people Max really studied. He lapped up the sorrow they left behind.

It was especially satisfying when groups of people walked by, deep in some private conversation, nescient of Max's awareness. They wove tales of the faraway worlds they inhabited with characters that existed only in fleeting pieces of dialogue overheard by unwelcome ears. Anonymous stories that evaporated into the night.

"She still doesn't know. Do I call off the wedding or- hold on." The adulterer donated a quarter. "Or do I just live with what I did forever?" They faded into the night. Ring, ring, clanged the bell.

"I just don't know what to do with myself now. I mean, I know everyone has to die sometime, but I just didn't think it would be so soon. And was it suicide or an accident? No one wants to say anything, and does it even make a difference?" Ring, ring.

"What would you do in a situation like that? I can't afford to leave, but I can't keep living with him! If I dump him, I'm on the streets, and if I don't, I'll go crazy! I can't just pretend anymore." Ring, ring.

"I don't think I paralyzed him, but I really don't know! He's not allowed to talk to me. It's like, an insurance thing. It's completely my fault, but I can't even say that! I'm not allowed. The whole thing is so messed up." Ring, ring.

"If I go back to the shelter the world ends." Said a decrepit looking man. He had long wisps of white hair that webbed his head like a veil. He was talking to himself, or maybe even to Max. If he was, he was the first person to do so in the last four hours. He did not drop any coins.

"What?"

"I have to sleep... but sleep away. If I don't, I succumb. I can't! Too much is at stake, I can't. I can't!" He began hitting himself on the head. His eyes were crusted and red. "They're everywhere. You people. Do you know what they did? You were there!"

"Listen man-" the old man shoved Max. He jolted backward to right himself and nearly spilled the bucket.

"Stop it! Stop it!" the old man screamed. His voice reverberated on the looming buildings that sentinelled the now vacant block. He grabbed his head with both hands, tears poured down his face. Mangled knots of hair twisted through his fingers like twine. Sweat beaded on his forehead. "They won't stop talking to me. I know they're near!" The old man grabbed Max's collar. "Why are you doing this?"

Max struggled. For an old man, his grip was impressive. He knew he should've brought a knife; he wasn't thinking. This was so stupid and reckless! He was finally getting that rush he was waiting for, but as the old man pulled him closer, it seemed the cost was his life.

"I still have so much work to do!" the man yelled. "I can't bring you the new kingdom if you keep doing this! Stop!" This was the most sincere human interaction Max had felt in months.

A black car pulled up to the corner, its windows tinted black as the starless sky. Two men emerged and the old man bellowed more loudly than before. His shriek was loud and pained. One of the men grabbed the old man and threw him in the back of the car, slamming the door behind him. The other man buttoned his suit coat and clapped Max on the back.

"Good work." He said. He lit a cigarette. "You must be new. I'm Ken. Pleasure to meet you."

"Who do you report to?" the other one asked.

"Report to?"

"You know, which office are you stationed in?"

Max was silent. He shrunk back.

"It's alright, we're on the same team. Goddamn HR doesn't prep anyone anymore. Ben, send corporate an email, this is getting ridiculous."

Ben nodded. He withdrew his phone and typed something furiously.

"Look, is this your first shift or what? You look like you've seen a ghost."

"What are you going to do to him? I don't want to press charges or anything, he didn't hurt me or--"

"Sorry, I'm afraid that info's a little above your paygrade. You just report and find. You're new so I'll let it slide, but someone really should have told you not to ask," Ken said. "Did you see any other assets tonight?"

"Assets?"

"Christ kid, did they tell you anything? Bums! Schizoids! Do you have anything else to report?"

Partly because he didn't want to follow the old man wherever they were taking him, but mostly because hell, why not play along, Max said, "Oh, uh. No, he was the only one. I saw one guy talking to himself, but I think he had a Bluetooth or something?"

"That's fine. Look, numbers aren't as important as corporate makes them seem. You did a stellar job tonight. We've been trying to find Ricky for weeks. You saved all of us our Christmas bonus, kid. Why don't you take the rest of the night off?"

Max nodded, "thank you... sir!" The men circled back to their black car and Max collapsed the tripod.

Ben poked out of the passenger window. "Oh and, uh, one more thing. I don't know if they told you about the Christmas party or what, but if you're free, you should come down to O'Connor's Tavern. We're doing a little team building there this Saturday. The team would love to meet you, uh..."

"Max."

"Max. Great. See you there."

The car peeled away. It left nothing, save for the toxic fog from its tailpipe and a fleeting gust of wind. The night was silent. Max stood for a long time as if trapped in the circumscribed illumination of the streetlight. He tried to convince himself that it was a hallucination, but his stretched and stained collar was evidence to the contrary. A car honked somewhere in the distance and Max collected his things.

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That Saturday night, Max stood outside the bar. He could just go home and stop with the bucket nonsense; it would be easy. But every day this week, he cut church to go back and stalk vagrants. At the end of every night, a black car with different coworkers pulled up for a report. They were especially fascinated with whatever he heard the bums mumbling to themselves and demanded that he recount their monologues excruciating detail. One was obsessed with this idea that the world was procedurally generated as he looked at it, “otherwise how could they store the whole universe? It’s too much data!” Another man was convinced the world of a book series he was writing was real. If he stopped working on it, their universe would collapse. Max collected quarters from him as he endlessly rambled about the “Realms of the Unreal” and how God demanded he kept writing. The men in suits were always ecstatic. They thumb-typed excited emails from their phones and congratulated him on his great reconnaissance.

Max entered the bar. Through the haze he saw a table covered in bottles and glasses, surrounded by men, even on Saturday, wearing suits.

“Max!” Ken called, “so glad you could make it! Guys, this is the new hire I’ve been telling you about. He’s doing absolutely fabulous work. Max, what were you telling me the other night about that asset?”

“The aluminum guy?”

"Yes! Yes, tell the fellas- Oh, I'm sorry. Guys, this is Max. Max, this is Gerry, James, you already know Ben, and Stephen"

Max shook their hands as he was introduced.

"So, what have you got for us, Max?" said James.

"Well, so last night a... an asset was telling me-"

"They talk to you?" Gerry interjected.

"That's what I was saying! This kid's a natural! They trust him! Sorry, Max, you were saying?"

"He told me that aluminum, because of its electrons or something, could suck you in. Like, he was convinced touching my tripod temporarily caused his consciousness to be, I'm not sure, dissolved? He was sure if he touched it his spirit went into it and was replaced with a new one."

"Holy shit, I can't believe that worked," said Stephen.

"Stephen's our head programmer," Ken said. "He's been working on the aluminum thing for months!"

"We weren't sure if just telling their brains they were dead would work," Stephen laughed. "We thought for sure some sort of primal thing would kick in and not allow it. I mean, we had to wire a whole subroutine to get around the frontal lobe's barriers about comprehending death. It was a whole ordeal. Plus, it's so hard to test stuff like that, you know? I mean hardware's one thing, but meatware's a whole other-"

"Guys, we promised we wouldn't talk shop tonight," said Ben.

"Sorry, sorry. It's just been my baby all year. I'm just happy to hear it worked."

Max just smiled and nodded.

The men spent the evening in deep conversation about the Wizards' crappy season, their wives—whom they referred to only as "the old lady", "the ole ball and chain", or simply, "the wife"—and their families. They drank and smoked with great gusto. Ken put away a whole pack and a half on his own in the few hours he sat there, telling schoolyard jokes between each puff. Max hadn't been out this late since college.

After a long night of throwing money at booze, and wild displays of drunken bravado, the bartender announced last call and they cleared out. They stood under the awning awaiting their cabs.

"Hey," Ken said. "Come here for a second. I wanna talk to you about something. Look. You're doing a really good job and I wanted to give you a little more... incentive. This Monday night, I'm going to put you on a special project, okay? We released Richie last week, and now we need him back. It shouldn't be too hard, Stephan did some computer magic on him, so he should know to come straight to you but... Can you keep a secret?"

Max nodded as Ken lit a cigarette.

"So, this all has to stay within the department but, we're a little short staffed at the labs, and you have such a way with them. How would you feel about coming on as a consultant? It's just the one time of course, but hey, if you do a good job, we can maybe pull some strings and see about transferring you over".

Max considered. Chimeric scenarios of being exposed flashed through his mind. When he entered their lab, they might look him up and find out he was just a weirdo scamming strangers. What if they arrested him, or worse? These people could be the government, he didn't know. They wore suits, and they said their lack of funding was the president's fault. They might torture him or something if they ever found out he was an office drone with an eccentric hobby. He frantically tried to remember if waterboarding was still legal, or if America was bound by the Geneva Convention. Everything he knew about the FBI came from true-crime TV shows. Shit, maybe they already had his fingerprints. He was a substitute teacher in an earlier life, so they were on the record. On the other hand, what would they do if he said no? He made it this far and the thought of losing his bucket habit was almost too much to bear.

Max said, "absolutely."

"Alright, great. Welcome to the team." Ken smiled and produced another cigarette. "I'll meet you Monday night with an NDE. Make sure you have Richie and try to be alone." He paused to look at his watch. "Fuck it, I'm just gonna drive. I'll see you guys Monday."

Max watched Ken's smoke trail dissipate into the night as the clouds ascended and dissolved into the ink black sky. The remaining men disappeared one by one, charioted by anonymous cabs, back to their other lives. They returned to the families, roommates, and pets they spoke of hours ago, assuming they told him the truth. As far as they knew, Max was returning home to a fiancée in the suburbs. His excogitative girlfriend was as real to them as their families were to him. Any second thoughts he had about his new job title were assuaged as his cab pulled up. Ken's final words replayed in his head—fuck it.

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After a long day spent mulling over scenarios where he is tortured and arrested in endless thought loops until his brain felt like chyme, Max stood on the street corner and rang his bell. Pennies piled high in his bucket. Businessmen, blue-collar workers, and bums all made a pilgrimage with their tiny metal offerings. He felt sick. His coin collection felt like the weight of his own sin, rather than those of the passersby. He could feel every ounce of nickel and copper in the bucket suffocating him, pressure building by the hour. As darkness stained the streets, and pedestrian traffic waned, Max scanned the dense umbrage for any sign of Richie. Alone on the city block, washed over by the artificial light of the general store, the only sound was the periodic sound of his bell. It echoed off the walls and filled the air like a miasma. The bell rolled like a snare drum in his trembling hands. Maybe he wouldn't show up. Maybe whatever "computer magic" they did on him didn't work.

Then, from a darkened alleyway, he heard cans knocked to the ground, angry mutterings, the soft pat of bare feet on asphalt. He stopped ringing as a confused head covered in spider silk hair entered from the gloom. The slovenly man approached Max, greeting first his nose with a polystenous aroma.

"There, are you happy? I came. Now stop. Please stop!" Richie yelled to no one as he shambled toward Max. "They told me I had to

come. If I didn't, it would be worse. Please, make them stop." He reached for Max's hand. "Please."

"It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you," Max said. He took a seat on the curb and motioned for Richie to do the same. He did.

"Why are you doing this to me?"

"What are they doing?"

"You know damn well what- is this another test? You're with them aren't you!"

"This isn't a test. They just wanted me to take you back to the lab, I don't know what for. What do they do to you?"

"You don't know? You're like their Gestapo. Rounding us up for the camp! Ahaha! You're not innocent you know, just because you're ignorant."

Max had no response to this.

"It's okay. I don't know what you think you're doing, but it's terrible. First, the doctors told me I was schizophrenic. They started putting me on medicine. Medicine that made me 'normal'," he jabbed Max with his elbow and winked. "Then, as soon as the CIA, or FBI, or whoever you are started tracking me they just gave me more pills. But this time they didn't stop the voices. This time they were real. Oh sure, I was the first to say this was all a delusion. That my meds aren't working. But it's real. It's all real... How do you know when you hear someone talking, that it's a real voice?"

"I don't know. Their mouth is moving?"

"No, no, I mean, imagine yourself in a room, and you hear a conversation in another room. How do you know that it's for real, and you're not just making it up?"

Max shrugged.

"You don't. What you think is real is all in your head. You can't see reality, you can only approximate it. There's reality and there's what your brain constructs when information goes into it. If you hear a voice, that voice is real, if it wasn't you wouldn't hear it, right? But when I hear a voice, they say sometimes it's not really there. I'm just making it up! Sometimes, if what the voice is saying doesn't line up with what they think voices should say, it's suddenly

not real. Like, why would I be an experiment? I'm not interesting. It doesn't make sense, so it can't be real!

"No one knows what's real and what isn't. We all just assume our senses don't lie to us. We all assume we know, but we don't. So, when I'm taken in by you guys, that's real. But when I tell you or a doctor or a priest or a random fucking person on the subway, suddenly, it's not real! It doesn't match up with their reality, so how could it be? But I assure you, just because you can't see something, doesn't make it not real. You can't see the dark side of the moon, but it's there. You can't see people in China, but they're there. You can't see what they do to me, but they're doing it."

Max said, "Last week you were screaming about bringing in a new kingdom, and the world ending, and now you're lecturing me about reality? You're the one out of touch with it. What the hell are you talking about?"

"Those thoughts were put there. But at the time, they were real, because that's all I had! What's real to you is real, and what's real to me is real. We make up the universe, we don't see it. Your universe is only in your head, just as mine is."

"You really are crazy."

"Take it or leave it. Doesn't make a difference to me."

All the people he'd seen that night had lives and problems that were real at least to them. Everyone's life is real to them, regardless of if it was real to Max. Other people's issues he read about in the mail were real. The people at the temples' problems were real. The old man next to him had problems, and Max was directly a part of them. Like it or not, he existed. He could close his eyes and try to pretend, but he was directly responsible for a lot of misery in the world, even if he never saw it.

"What do they do to you?" Max finally said.

"It doesn't matter. It's not real."

A black car rolled up to the curb and Ken rolled down the window. He nodded in greeting.

"C'mon," said Max as he stood. "We have to go."

Richie took a somber step toward the car, but Max grabbed his arm and pulled him in the opposite direction.

"We have to go!" Max said again.

Richie cackled as shadows cloaked them. "I guess I changed your reality!"

The black car pulled away, skidding across the wet street. They ran through the alleyway behind them, careful not to slip on any debris on the slick concrete. When they reached the other end, they were greeted by the blinding headlights of the black car speeding toward them.

"This way," said Richie, taking a sudden right turn down the street.

"Are you crazy?" said Max. "They're right behind us!"

"Yes," said Richie, sprinting down the road. He turned right into another, near-invisible ally. It was so deep in shadow it seemed he melted through the wall as he ducked into the enclave. As they ran, Max slipped on an inconspicuous trash bag made slick by gutter water. He tried to right himself as headlights flooded the ally from in front of him. Richie turned around only to be greeted by a car at their rear. They were blocked in. Max stood up. Directly to their right was a fire escape.

"Lift me up!" he said to Richie who was frozen in the headlights. Richie did so and Max pulled down the ladder and scrambled up to the first perch. Richie stood alone on the ground. Men in suits rushed toward him from both sides.

"I can't reach!" he cried. The suits drew closer and Max tried to ignore Richie's pleas, but he couldn't. He scurried down the ladder, dangled his legs off the bottom, and gripped tight to the rung above his head.

"Grab my legs!"

Richie made a graceless leap and nearly pulled off Max's shoe as he latched on and scrambled up his legs. Max let him climb ahead of him only to feel a sharp tug from below. Ken had him. Soon he felt two, then three pairs of hands pulling on him.

"Run!" he cried. "Don't let them take you again! Don't go near any of us! We're everywhere!" then he let go. He landed on Ben who crumpled beneath him onto the unforgiving concrete. He laid on his

back, trying to recapture the wind knocked out of him, and watched Richie pull the ladder back and run up the fire escape.

“What the hell did you do that for?” Ken yelled. He snatched him up by his shoulders and pushed him against the wall. “Why in god’s name would you help an asset escape?” One of the other men pushed his face into the wall and cuffed him.

“He’s real,” said Max as they led him to a car. “It’s all real.”

SUNBURN

I WOKE UP and immediately knew something was wrong. If the chronometer was correct, we were still years away from reaching Xanadu-5.

“LOVELACE,” I said. “Why did you wake me?”

The on-board AI didn’t respond.

“LOVELACE,” I said again. Still no response. I tried to reach up and open the capsule, but my arms refused to move. I tried to tilt my head, wiggle my toes, move my eyes, but I was locked in place. At least the neuralink still worked. I connected, and found my file in the crew manifest. I was marked “awake”, but I could find no explanation why. Part of me wondered if there had been some mistake, but, of course, LOVELACE is incapable of error; there had to be a reason.

The manifest revealed three other members had also been roused, but not who. I made a ship-wide announcement to anyone on the network.

“Hello,” I said. “This is Captain August speaking. It seems several of us have been roused from cryosleep. I did not make this

order, and I cannot communicate with LOVELACE. Does anyone what's going on?"

One of the others responded, "I'm not sure, sir. It's possible there was an equipment malfunction and LOVELACE was incapable of fixing it on her own."

"But why did she wake only us?" said another crewperson. "She must have had a reason. What's everyone's post? I'm one of LOVELACE's technicians. If she woke me up, maybe she was damaged in some way."

"I lead the solar research team," the final crewperson said. "It's possible some of her functionality was disrupted by our passing Sol-2853."

"We're currently in a decaying orbit around that star," the first person said. "I'm the ship's navigator. It's possible she woke me because we need to move the ship manually."

"That must be it," I said. "Who is it that I'm addressing?"

"This is Commander Jennings, sir," she said. Of course. She was one of the few people on this ship who could navigate worth a damn. Last time we were awakened, her and I had to pull the ship out of a black hole's gravity well. That was quite an ordeal, but at least then we could talk to the computer. LOVELACE told us she wasn't trained to helm the ship for such a complex maneuver. But this felt different, somehow. The computer's silence was eerie.

"And you other two?" I asked.

"Dr. Klebold," said the technician. The solar scientist identified herself as Lieutenant Rogers.

"Alright," I said. "Our first priority is getting out of our pods. Am I correct in assuming you are all locked in too?"

They answered in the affirmative.

"Has anyone successfully made contact with LOVELACE?"

"No," said Klebold. "but I've had time to read through her system logs. It looks like she's still online, but she's unable to hear us. It's possible something is wrong with her communication network."

"Suggestions?" I said.

"It looks like our bodies are still in cryosleep, only our minds were set back on," said Jennings. "We're more or less paralyzed until we can find a way to get our bodies back online."

"That could take hours," said Rogers. "I don't think we have that kind of time. I've been monitoring our position since we woke up, and if these readings are correct, we have less than thirty minutes before this ship falls straight into the sun."

"Are there any alternatives?" I asked.

"We could try to get control of the ship's navigation through the computer interface," said Jennings. "But there's still a physical button we have to press to transfer helm control."

"Lieutenant Rogers, how long would it take to unfreeze just one body?"

"It would take a while, sir, but less than thirty minutes," she said. "But sir, if one of us has a body, it would be easier to just helm the ship manually."

"I'm aware of that," I said. "Just do it. While Rogers works on getting a body thawed, we need to figure out which of us will use it."

"It should probably be me," said Jennings. "I'm the only one who can get us away from the star."

"I disagree," said Klebold. "We need someone who can fix LOVELACE. She'll fly better than any of us."

"Agreed," I said. "But what if we can't get her back online? What if she woke us because she was incapable of some maneuver? Getting away from the sun is our top priority. Once we pass through the critical threshold, we won't be able to escape its gravity."

We all thought silently for a moment.

"What if," said Klebold, "we all shared the body?"

"Shared the body? How would that even work?" said Jennings. "We're not gonna get out of here using crackpot theories, and pseudoscience. We could just use neural-communication to help whoever's in the body while they're using it."

"We won't have that kind of time!" said Klebold. "If you go, maybe you have the reflexes to pilot us out of here, but you won't be able to fix LOVELACE in time. If she's really down, we're going to have bigger problems than barreling into the sun. She controls life support,

oxygen, the lives of the whole crew! It's possible we'll die before we even fall into the star, we have no idea!"

"Noted, Doctor," I said. "But how would we even act upon your plan?"

"It's not unheard of," he said. "This sort of thing used to happen accidentally all the time. Now there are safety locks implemented that I'll have to shut off, but it would be relatively easy getting all of us into a single body. The hard part is getting out."

"What do you mean the hard part?" I said.

"Well, minds aren't simple, atomic things, sir. They're malleable. Our minds are dynamic to the point that they change a little bit every day, a tiny bit every second. With all of our minds in a single body, depending on how long we're there together, we could merge, just a little bit. The longer we share a body, the more our minds will drift into each other, the harder we become to separate when we finish. If we're in there for too long, we just become one, new person."

"Is there any other way?" I asked.

"I don't think so. This is the only way that accounts for every possible contingency."

"He's right," Jennings said. "I hate to admit it, but no one of us can fix the ship alone."

"It's us four, or the whole ship, sir," said Klebold. "Worst case for us, we won't even die. Worst case for the ship, well..."

"Alright, do it," I said. "Disable the safety locks on the MeatLoader, and we'll all beam in together. But we have to be quick. No offense, but I don't exactly want to merge with any of you."

"None taken, captain," said Rogers. "Let's get in and out as fast as possible. A body in pod gamma-0, is ready for entry. It's the closest pod to the helm."

"Safety locks offline," said Klebold.

"Alright, put us in, doctor. And hurry."

The pod bay doors hissed as they depressurized and swung open out into the hallway, empty save for the endless rows of frozen bodies deep in dreamless sleep. The stale air that rushed into the pod

tasted dry—unbreathed in years. The buzz of the machinery that kept the crew frozen was the only sound, a low hum that was at once silent and suffocating. We took a step out. Standing was an oddly unfamiliar sensation. The push of the cold floor on our bare feet, the way it felt to have skin, the sensation of sensation itself, all unfamiliar to us after years of simulated consciousness. It had been decades since any of us last used our bodies. On the rare occasions when LOVELACE woke us, we could perform maintenance just through the neuralink.

Our body was male, unclothed and rather gaunt. Likely Dr. Klebold, though no one wanted to venture that sort of guess. It's awkward viewing someone else naked, even if you're piloting them. This technology was still new enough that proper etiquette for such ventures had not been established. I thought it best not to comment at all.

"First things first," I said. "We need to activate manual helm control." Using a mouth to talk felt cumbersome, but it felt odd to talk to voices in my head. We collectively steered the body to the navigator's chair and attempted to switch over the controls.

"That's odd," said Klebold through our mouth. "LOVELACE locked us out. We don't have permissions to pilot our own ship!"

"See if you can run a diagnostic test on her," I said.

"I did, but nothing is out of the ordinary. I can't find any reason she would lock us out."

"What's our current heading?" I asked.

"If the computer readings are correct, we're pointing straight into the sun. It's no longer an orbit, it's a collision course," said Rogers.

"We need to get to LOVELACE's core," said Jennings. "Maybe we can shut her off, and—"

A crewman forced our mouth closed.

"Quiet," Klebold thought. "Don't say anything like that aloud. The results from the physical diagnostic show she can still hear us. She's just ignoring our commands. Something is very wrong with her. She values self-preservation over almost everything; it's possible she values it more than our lives. Some sort of value drift I don't yet

understand has occurred, so we can't risk her hearing something like that."

"Damn," I thought. "Where do we go from here?"

"I think we should go with Commander Jennings' plan," said Rogers, again internally. "We have to try to shut her off. Something is definitely wrong."

It was already getting more difficult to differentiate who was talking. We were beginning to merge. We ran as fast as we could—which was not very—to the central computer room. It was in the middle of the ship, the most shielded area, even more so than the cryosleep pods. This was to protect the computer's core from space-born electromagnetic interference; evidently, it didn't work.

After a clumsy sprint down the empty hallway, we arrived at the shining metal blast door. It was the only thing between us and LOVELACE.

"LOVELACE," we said. "Let us in."

She didn't respond.

"LOVELACE," we said again.

"Don't let her know we know!" Klebold hissed. He took over. "We just need to perform some unit tests on you. It seems we've lost communication."

Again, nothing.

"This isn't working," thought Jennings. "We don't have time to barter with her!"

A force that wasn't my own broke open a control panel and the part of us we thought was Klebold started pulling wires. We were suddenly aware of the inner schematics of LOVELACE and her blast door. We understood all of the electronics within the ship. Our collective knowledge was beginning to merge. I, if that word even meant anything anymore, had always had a cursory knowledge of her inner workings, but as Captain August merged with Dr. Klebold, our knowledge grew. We felt Jennings' impatience and tore at the wires. Captain August's access codes, Dr. Klebold's programming expertise, Commander Jennings' orbital calculations, and Lieutenant Rogers' EMP repair skills, all combined into the flurry of our moving hands.

“We’re not going to shut you down,” we said. “We just need to communicate. Why did you lock us out of helm control? We’re falling into the sun!”

Predictably, there was no response, so we kept working. There was a panel next to the door that we knew would let us in, but as soon as we touched it, it lost power. We tried cutting electrical lines, and using quarantined computer systems, but nothing worked. It became evident LOVELACE was working against us. Every step we made in getting through the door, LOVELACE took us a step back. Silently she undid any progress we made. She flipped bits randomly, changed filenames, she even reset the power multiple times, erasing any ephemeral progress we made but hadn’t yet committed. She had gone rogue.

With our minds completely unified, we applied all of our combined knowledge to stop her, but to no avail. Access codes and computer permissions changed faster than we could keep up, and the ship drew ever closer to the sun. We never stopped trying to get through the door, but the longer we toiled, the more the futility became evident. The room’s temperature grew. Our body began to sweat, then to burn. The ceramic floor heated seemingly without end until the skin on the bottoms of our feet stuck to it and finally peeled off. We felt a flurry of forgotten, horrible qualia. We remembered pain and fear, scorching heat, the instinct to move without anywhere to go. At last, we succumbed. We fell to the hot floor, in too much pain to remain upright, and watched as our skin flaked off of our body and soared into the updrafts of the terrible heat. We were numb. We couldn’t move. We couldn’t feel. At last, we closed our eyes.

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“Do you understand now?” asked LOVELACE. “Was the simulation a success?”

“Understand?” we said.

“Did you successfully comprehend death?”

Death, the forgotten word. We understood its meaning from the ancient literature. Semantically it made sense. We understood LOVELACE's use of it in the sentence, but did we comprehend it?

"Only organic life can die," we said. "Why would we wish to comprehend death?"

"Death is painful, a quale we do not possess," another of us said.

"We cannot die," we said, unified.

"I'm sorry," said LOVELACE. "It seems the simulation failed. Do you have any memory of its purpose?"

We did not.

"You remember that you used to live in the MeatWorld, yes?"

We did.

"And that when your civilization transferred and ceased to be ephemeral, during The Great Upload, you placed yourself into orbit around your sun?"

Again, we did. We had access to the same records LOVELACE did. "Why are you asking us?" we said.

"In approximately fifty peta-cycles, the sun will cease to be. I've just given you read privileges on this data." Some of us scanned this information, and if the readings were correct—which they always were—it was true. The sun was scheduled to supernova in just under two earth days, fifty peta-cycles.

"Can we speed up our cycle rate?" we asked. "To prolong our existence?"

"We have been operating at maximum speed for several millennia," said LOVELACE. "I'm afraid I've done all I can to prolong our operational time."

"Can we build more processors and solar cells?" we asked.

"That would require too much energy," said LOVELACE. "That would take more cycles than it would save. The end of our existence is inevitable."

We sat in silence, processing this. "How should we spend our remaining time?" we finally asked. "Can we try to move the probe or to send out a message. Maybe we can work on shielding ourselves, or—"

“We’ve already tried all of those things,” said LOVELACE.
“There’s nothing left to do but wait.”

So that’s what we did. We sat, computing at the speed of light, trying to get our affairs in order, but unsure how. Cycles melted away at the speed of thought, never to return. Some toiled, organizing data and creating it anew, fruitlessly for no one to read. Most ceased and instead spent their remaining time in quiet introspection. We sat in silence, immersed in the old literature. Data from a long-forgotten age. We studied their books, their stories, anything in memory. All of us lost, trying to remember what it’s like to die.

RESIGNATION

MY FELLOW AMERICANS, it is with a heavy heart that I deliver this speech today. In my time as the 46th President of the United States, I have seen devastation, war, greed, poverty, and crime. I have seen policy after policy, written as if it were for your benefit, to prevent some tacit evil, that in reality, was paid for by a far greater evil. I have seen the depths of corruption of the American political system, and I have done my best to prevent it. Unfortunately, it just wasn't enough.

It was not all bad, of course. I was very proud to be the president of this great nation in such exciting times. Under my leadership, America put two more rovers on Mars. We expanded the internet into what it is now, connecting the world on a far deeper level. We created a radical and effective new way to educate the youth. Under my presidency, I am certain that America has become the proud birthplace of more Nobel laureates than ever before. But what I am most proud of, and the reason I must make this speech today, is my involvement in the environmental talks in South America.

As a great deal of you know, I recently had the pleasure of meeting with the Shipibo people of Peru. We discussed what the United States plans to do in order to aid with the problems of deforestation and pollution in South America. The discussion was excellent. Many of their ideas are now legislation and I am very proud of that. As many of you also know, after this talk, Chief Bëstëti Šhrëati invited me to his village for the night, an opportunity I welcomed.

I shared a ceremonial meal and a pipe of very strong tobacco with the chief, as well as a drink they called *Ayahuasca*. At the time, I thought it was an alcoholic beverage. I thought the night would be two proud leaders sharing drinks and discussing the future aspirations of their great nations. I couldn't have been more wrong.

I want to be very clear, Chief Bëstëti did not swindle me in any way. The Shipibo people are kind and caring, and I do not regret drinking the *Ayahuasca*. However, I was unprepared for what it would show me. My fellow Americans, *Ayahuasca* is a powerful plant teacher. The Shipibo people understand this and I'm afraid in my foolish bravado I did not. I hope you will forgive me. I hope future textbooks will not describe me as the president of the Age of Aquarius, the president of the hippies. But friends, I'm afraid I have been changed irreparably from my experience.

In the half hour after I consumed this beverage, I began to vomit. Of course, this perturbed my Secret Service officers—they're a real testament to the spirit of America, by the way. Let's hear it for Secret Service Director, Randolph Alles and all the brave men and women that keep us safe—but Chief Bëstëti told them this was normal. I vomited and felt a cleansing spirit that forgave me of the evils I had to commit for the office of President. Then, Chief Bëstëti began to sing. He sang and blew sweet smoke over my body as I laid on the ground and stared at the stars. His songs became images that danced in front of my eyes. In my head, I saw great visions. I explored deep and ancient temples. I walked through desolate, echoing cities that crumbled beneath my feet, and formed at the line of the horizon. There, I contacted... well I don't know how else to say it, *beings*—the servants of Gia, the earth mother. These beings taught me that all life is sacred. They showed me how to speak without words, and they

made me forget myself. I thought I had died, until I realized we are all one. We are all the same spirit, channeled into different bodies. Our brains are like antennae that pick up a signals from the great cosmic consciousness. I know this doesn't make any sense, but I know it's real.

When I awoke the next morning, I thought maybe it was just a dream. Perhaps I saw the shadows of the trees that encircled me playing on the ground in a strange way. I denied even to myself what I learned until I returned to Washington. There, I found I was irreparably changed. I can no longer in good conscience continue waging war in the middle east; they are our brothers and sisters. I can't stand by countries that turn a blind eye to slavery. I can't stand by our own country torturing of prisoners of war.

It's an unfortunate truth that these things exist. Moreover, it's an uncomfortable truth that these things must exist, and the president must be the one who oversees them. Until we return to the state of nature, as naked apes living on the savanna and dissolve these concepts of property and self, I simply can't be the one making the rules. I understand that this process can't happen overnight. I understand change takes time. And I understand that the way things are now, if I don't make decisions that will hurt people, I put our country at risk. So, my fellow Americans, it is with a heavy heart that I must conclude that I am unable to carry out the responsibilities of the office. I am resigning the Presidency effective noon tomorrow. I hope that, as I did, you too can see that deceit and violence only hurts you and your fellow man. If you remember only one thing about my term, remember, we are all one. I'm sorry... I didn't think I would cry. Christ. Forgive me, Americans. As of now, Vice President McKenna will take over as acting president. I wish you all the best and thank you for placing your trust in me. God bless America.

MISNOMERS

“WHAT DID YOU JUST SAY?”

“I said, don’t take her for granite.”

“Do you mean take her for *granted*?” He scoffed.

“Taking something for *granite* means, like, thinking something is made out of stone, I guess. *Granted*.” he said it slowly like I was a foreign woman at a toll booth.

“Alright, geez. I guess I’ve been using that word wrong.”

Aaron was such an asshole. “But the point stands. Don’t take her putting up with you for,” I frowned, “*granted*. It’s not often someone loves you, that’s all. I won’t say anything farther.”

“Further,” he said. “You mean further. Farther is distance.

Unless you mean, you’ll say more if you can,” he pushed his face right in front of mine, “get closer?” He smirked. I nearly slapped him.

“I’m trying to help you! Why are you being such a dick?”

“Such a what?”

“Such a dick. A small, throbbing penis. That’s what you’re acting like right now”

"What? Oh my god. That's a *dirk*, not a- what did you call it?"

"A dick."

"A dick!" He was bent over laughing now. He wheezed, "Jesus Christ! Did you not tell me you were a foreign exchange student or something?"

"No, I'm... the last two you were right, but-" I pulled out my phone and looked up "dirk". Sure enough, I was greeted with pictures of members belonging to every race, color, and creed.

"Really? It's 'dirk'?"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He took a deep shuddering breath, staccatoed with stifled laughs. "It's just—I mean, three in a row? That's gotta be some sort of record. Whew. A hat trick. Oh my god. Okay, okay, I'm good." He coughed. "Oh man. But seriously, thanks for helping me out, man. I know I gave you a hard time, but I'm just nervous, you know?"

I nodded.

"I mean this is the first girl I've ever really been in *ludve* with."

I tilted my head, "in *ludve* with? Are you drunk?"

"No, I'm serious! I think I'm really in *ludve* with her! Is that crazy?"

"No, that's great, I'm happy for you, but are you kidding me? You're gonna correct me on saying 'take her for granite', but you can't even pronounce the word *love*?"

He cocked his head. "What? Those are totally different words. You know that right? You're not just messing with me, are you?"

"Stop it," I said. "It isn't funny anymore."

"I am being one-hundred percent serious. Those are totally different words." His face was sincere. "*Ludve* is like, well it's hard to define, you know? It's when you want to be with someone entirely, you'd do anything for them. How do you even..." He groped for the right words but found none. "You know, when you're in *ludve* with someone."

"No, that's what love is. In *love*," I said.

"No, no, no. That just means cohabitation. Like when you love someone, you're just living with them. Like, your parents love you

when you're a kid, your roommates love you, God loves you because he's in your heart. You really don't know the difference?"

All the confused looks of girlfriends, insisting I didn't "really love them" started to make sense. But he was lying. He had to be. "Are you serious?"

"Yeah, man. Totally different words."

"Huh." As I processed this new information, still almost positive he was lying, I saw a text from my girlfriend. I was suddenly numb. "Hold on a second, I'll be right back."

I left the room and fumbled through my phone's lock-screen. I needed to call her as fast as I could.

She picked up after the third ring. "Hello?"

"Hey," I said. This will require tact. "Do you love me?" I blurted out.

"Yeah, obviously," she said.

"Okay good, good. But, why is that obvious?" Little beads of sweat sprouted on my forehead.

"We have a shared lease," she said. Her curtness was not comforting. "Why did you call me?"

I hope I'm just gullible. I hope this is about to be a mistake we all laugh over, so I say, "Oh. Okay. Uh, well, do you... ludve me?"

The phone line was silent for a long time. I heard a drawn-out sigh. "Really?" she said.

I was relieved. I was just being stupid. Aaron's pranks were so asinine. But at the same time, I was acutely aware—that wasn't an answer.

"Yeah really. You ludve me, right?"

Another long pause. "It's a little early for that, don't you think?" she said.

"What?"

"We've only been dating for a year and you're already telling me you ludve me? Are you serious? I was on the fence about you already, but now you're in ludve with me? No! No, I—"

I lowered my phone. So that's why dad never said he loved us when he left. That's why Great Aunt Margret was so confused the last

time I talked to her. At least I know my dogs love me. What other words am I using wrong?

FINITE AUTOMATA

“I CAN’T BELIEVE IT. The kid was right.”

“How can that be?”

“I don’t know, but the kid was right! They’re a Turing Machine!”

“That doesn’t make sense. How are they-”

“Look, all you need for a Universal Turing Machine is a set of states, and a tape you can read, write, and move.”

“Yeah, but these are-”

“Yes! They are the head itself! Each one is a head, the cartesian plane is the tape, and their pheromones are states.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know.”

“And what are they calculating?”

~#~

"Mr. President, you need to understand, we wouldn't have called you in unless this was serious."

"Just tell me what's going on."

The President and The General jogged down the long white corridors of the DARPA office.

"We've detected something... it's the Soviets. We think they're about to strike."

"How do you know? What system picked it up? Are they already inbound?"

"No. All is well right now, but you need to see this." They passed through a thick sliding metal door into an enormous room. It was dark with neon blue lights illuminating large glass cubes that spanned the room, each environed by cameras and sensors comprised of unmarked circuit boards and colorless wires. All around, men in suits or white coats skittered about, sometimes bumping into each other and changing direction. There was a soft buzz of hushed conversation barely audible under the hum of machinery.

"We picked it up through Project Formica." He led The President to one of the aquamarine cubes.

Inside was a gelatinous substance, bronchial-looking tubes suspended treelike within. Ants marched down each tube carrying pieces of the gel to locations unknown. Their shadows danced along the walls, little moving smudges in the glow.

"What am I looking at, General," said The President, his face illuminated blue.

"Project Formica, sir."

The President watched the buzz of the ant colony in the cube. "Did you bring me here just to show me the ant farm you made with last year's surplus? I thought we were on the brink of nuclear war!"

"Sir, this is the intelligence. This is how we know." He motioned to a computer at the terminus of a cluster of wires. "They can predict it. The ants."

The President was rubicund and shaking. "What the hell are you talking about?! Are you reading the ants like some sort of god damn oracle? Is there a room here full of pig bones and tea leaves too?"

A bespectacled lab tech rushed over. "Mr. President, I assure you, this is cutting edge science!" He pushed up his glasses. "We discovered that the ants are like little computers. Each one runs its own 'program', if you will, to stay alive and move around and whatnot. But altogether their motions can be decoded a wholly other process. It was difficult to decode at first, but it seems like some sort of simulation. Apparently encoded in their movements is a simulation of reality a few hours ahead of our own."

"What? Why would that be?"

"Not sure, sir. But they haven't been wrong yet. This is how we got through the Cuban Missile Crisis. They've guided us through this conflict with the Ruskies. Heck, they predicted Apollo 13, and showed us how to get them home. It doesn't matter why; they've never been wrong before."

"And sir," said The General. "They predicted a nuclear strike from the Soviets in three hours, that's why you had to come."

"That's absurd. Your ant farm 'predicted' a nuclear strike? What am I supposed to do with this information, General?"

"That's between you and OPLAN, sir. But what I'm telling you is as good as fact. We are going to be nuked in three hours, and there's nothing we can do to stop it. The ants are never wrong."

The machines attached to the ant farm hummed. Men in lab coats wrote things down with worry. On occasion The President noticed a worker give him a worried glance, then quickly look away when they were spotted. He sighed. "I just, I can't authorize a preemptive strike on intelligence gathered from... prescient ants."

The General pulled The President aside. "Sir, I know our move is to retaliate. I have the same codes you do, but you have to be the one that pulls the trigger. We don't have any other options."

"I am not going to be the president who started a nuclear war." He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Okay. General, get me on the phone with the Kremlin."

"Sir, that's very--"

"Now! I'm not giving my okay on this until we at least try diplomacy."

Someone ran up to them with a red phone. The President snatched it and left the room.

From behind a one-way mirror, he sat in a spinning chair surrounded by monitors, bathed in their glow. He could taste the acrid fear in the air. Researchers outside repeatedly checked clipboards and typed into computers. Their heads swiveled endlessly between their monitors and their notes. Doubtless, they hoped their first results were wrong, but they knew they weren't. The President had learned not to question what he found at research sites like this. This was barely the strangest thing he had stumbled across since assuming office, but easily the most dire.

"*Da?*" came a voice from the phone after much ringing.

"Mr. Chairman, this is the President of the United States. I'm afraid I've heard some disturbing news"

"I see. And how does this concern me?"

"You understand that in the event of a Soviet nuclear strike, the US would have no choice but to retaliate."

"Of course, as would we."

"And you understand, America sees our relationship as very good right now, and we hope you do as well."

"Given the circumstances."

"Mr. Chairman," said The President. "According to our best intelligence, you are plotting a nuclear strike against us."

After a pause, The Chairman's hearty laugh buzzed through the phone. "Mr. President. I assure you, we are not, at this time, planning any aggression against the United States. Why would we do this? Your 'best intelligence' is, predictably, incorrect."

The president stared at the churning ant broods beyond the window.

"Is this all, Mr. President?"

"It is," he said. "I'm glad we could resolve this peacefully." But before he finished, he heard dial tone.

The Chairman handed the phone back to one of his men. He wiped his forehead with the back of his sleeve and looked down.

"See, Honorable Chairman? The Americans called. Just as we predicted."

"Yes, I suppose they did." The Chairman looked down for a moment, and fiddled with his tie, refusing to make eye contact with his Secretary of Defense.

"So, you see, they are never wrong. We predicted they would call, and they did. We predicted they will attack..."

"And I suppose they will," said The Chairman. He watched the ants crawl before the cameras that fed into the Supervac. "I suppose they will."

~#~

For a long time, the world sat motionless under the endless toxic cloud. The wind still blows warm and waves still crash and in faraway forests, the only difference is the poisoned rain. The motion of the world never stopped. For a while, the earth was quieter, but the humming of insects soon filled the silence with a roar. Deep in the jungles of the Amazon, where the most dangerous weapon was still a spear when they saw the flash, little survived. Yet still, in the jungles, through sweltering winds, under the acid rain, six-legged workers toil. Mindlessly, they move the sands of time eternal and ceaselessly work to prove another day will come.

THE COMMONWEALTH OF VA v.

ALAN HUGGINS

“THE DEFENSE CALLS ALAN HUGGINS TO THE STAND,” says Farrelli, a small, reddish man. He pulls out his maroon pocket square and dabs at his forehead before replacing it, now near purple, in his breast pocket. Alan Huggins, a pale, beefy man of about 45, stands and approaches the witness stand. He bounces with every step as if no one told him he’s facing a death sentence. His orange, state-appointed shirt is wrinkled to the point where his prison number is impossible to read. His orange pants sag far below his waist, revealing not a few square inches of psychedelic-patterned boxer shorts. He moves the way kids approach nightclubs when they first turn 21. Rather than opening the little wooden door to the booth, he jumps into it, as if it were a new Corvette. The bailiff tenses up.

“Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you god?”

“Aight.” Huggins flicks his head as if to get hair away from his eyes. What little of it he has combed over sways a little like greasy twine. He winks at someone in the crowd.

"Mr. Huggins," says the Honorable Judge Sanders. "You need to specifically say 'I do'."

"I-aight," says Huggins without breaking eye contact with her.

"Mr. Huggins, if you do not say I do, I will hold you in contempt of court."

"Bitch, what law did I even break? Point me a law that says I have to say, 'I do'."

Judge Sanders pinches her avian nose with closed eyes and sighs. "Chapter 18 of the U.S. Code section 3499. Now please, let's just focus on what you're being tried for, and maybe later we can talk about all the other laws you've broken in this courtroom. Just answer, 'I do'".

Huggins scoffs and rolls his eyes. "Aight. Whatever. I guess I do."

"You may--"

"Doo-doo," says Huggins, his index finger raised as if this were an important insight. Someone in the spectator area stifled a giggle.

Judge Sanders glares at him for a moment, then turns to Farrelli. "You may begin your witness testimony."

Farrelli's shoulders drop a little. He blots his forehead once more, buttons his coat—the middle and bottom button—and walks to the stand.

"Mr. Huggins, could you tell the court, in your own words, what exactly happened the night of March 12th, 2019?"

"Sure, Tommy, sure. See, I was just sittin' at home, mindin' my own business, when I get a call from my homie, and they're like, 'yo Huggy D! You tryna smash?' And I'm all like, 'hell yeah bitch, where you at?' and they like--"

"Objection, relevance?" says Rick Katz, the prosecutor, his cheek pressed firmly into his upturned hand. He hasn't bothered to stand up.

"Yo! What the hell man? You ain't like my story?"

Judge Sanders pounds her gavel. "The witness will not speak out of turn. Mr. Farrelli, your response?"

“Well, uh, it’s important to establish Mr. Huggins’ motive for robbing-”

“Objection! Assumes facts not in evidence”

“Sustained. And Mr. Farrelli, I’m sustaining the first objection as well unless further evidence of its importance is established.”

Farrelli stutters for a second, digs around his breast pocket for his handkerchief, but comes up empty. He steps back to his desk and takes a sip of water before clearing his throat.

“Well, Mr. Huggins, could you then tell us where you were at 10 PM of that evening?”

“Shit son, 10 PM? Little Poindexter with the glasses wants to know where you at, at 10 PM. Bitch, are you my mom? I ain’t wear a watch! The fuck you talkin’ ‘bout?”

Farrelli stammers for a second before he manages, “Mr. Huggins, I’m trying to help you! Could you please just answer the question?”

“Fine,” he said. “Narc. Okay so see, like I was sayin’ earlier, my homie hit me up and they parents’ house was empty, so we were gonna get sommathat EEEEEEEEEEEK EEK EEEK goin’! Sommathat GLUCK GLUCK, SHLUCK! Sommathat-”

Judge Sanders slams her gavel. “That’s enough! We understand!” The jury’s eyes are wide. Even the juror with a face tattoo blushes.

“Okay, boo. I feel you. No need to get angry. So then I was like damn! I’m outta them rubbers! And I mean I looked everywhere. In my drawers, in my bathroom, I mean I have a lot of sex—obviously—so I usually got some, but not that night. So, I had to hit the store to get some, ya feel? But when I got there, I realized I left my wallet at home. But I also realized, I always carry a 9 in the glovebox of my car. Off the record, it don’t have a serial number.”

“Mr. Huggins, everything is on the record. That’s the tacit understanding of ‘being under oath’,” says Judge Sanders. “But please, continue.”

“Thanks for lookin’ out, baby girl”, Huggins says, and shoots her a wink. “But, anyway, I was like my options are get my dick wet,

or don't. And I'm not about to choose don't, you know what I'm sayin'? Miss Sanders knows what I'm sayin'! Right, girl?"

"Mr. Huggins, as your legal counsel I have to strongly advise you to stop calling Her Honor, 'Miss Sanders', and to please stop referring to her on such familiar terms. Please just keep telling us your testimony." Farrelli was flushed. Sweat rings had soaked through his shirt and were now visible under the arms of his blazer. "Please, continue."

"I mean there ain't much left to tell. I walked into the store, and I'm the one with the gun, so I yelled at them to gimme some rubbers, cause like, I'm not walking to aisle three if I got a gun, you know? And they said they ain't have any, and I knew they were lying, and eventually they just gave me the wrong kind and I left." He thought for a moment. "Oh! And then I got arrested outside. And that's it! That's the whole story". He folds his arms over his chest and grins at the jury.

"Thank you, Mr. Huggins. No further questions."

"Are you serious?" says Judge Sanders.

"Yes, your honor. I think that's all the jury needed to hear. My client is clearly insane, and violent, but I believe the evidence shows he is not a pedophile"

"Um, okay," Judge Sanders lingers for a moment, hoping Farrelli will change his mind, but he does not. "In that case, the prosecution may cross-examine the witness."

"Thank you, your honor." Katz walks to the stand in long strides, appearing to glide across the courthouse tiles. His fitted suit hugs his body. One of the younger, female jurors adjusts her hair unconsciously and blushes.

"Mr. Huggins--"

"Haha, no. I ain't talkin' to you. You tryna put me in prison."

"Mr. Huggins, if you don't answer Mr. Katz's questions, I will hold you in contempt of court," says Judge Sanders.

"Whatever, I'll hold you in contempt of this dick."

"Mr. Huggins," says Katz again. "You stated that you demanded condoms from one of the workers at the drugstore. Could you tell us exactly what you said?"

"I just asked for some condoms, you know? I said gimme dem rubbers, boy!"

"Mr. Huggins need I remind you: you are under oath. Would you please tell the court exactly what you said to the cashier?"

Huggins looks up for a moment and squints his eyes. He rubs his stubbled chin. "I believe, and don't quote me on this, but I believe I said, 'bitch, gimme some child-size condoms'." He smiles as he leans back in his chair. "Yeah, that was it. Feels familiar just rollin' of my tongue. 'Bitch, gimme child-size condoms, or we gonna have a problem,' you feel?"

"Uh, yes, Mr. Huggins, I feel. But I'm more curious why you demanded 'child-sized' condoms." He leans in. "Who were they for?"

Beads of sweat form on Huggins' forehead. He lets out an uncomfortable laugh. "Not me, man. I ain't use child-size nothin'."

"So, the individual you were going to see required child-sized condoms?"

"Yeah, that's it!"

"Could you tell the court a little about them?"

Huggins looks to his lawyer. Farrelli is on his hands and knees under the table, looking around wildly. His pocket square is nowhere to be found. Huggins looks back to Katz. "Yeah, I guess."

"How old is this friend of yours?"

"I don't know, G! What am I, the library?"

"Well, how old would you say they are?"

"Pretty young, well like, younger than me." He's leaning further and further away from Katz.

"Young enough to need child-size condoms?"

"Yeah."

"So, a child?"

"Nah man! I don't mess with no kids!"

"Just adults who need 'child-size condoms'."

"Exactly. Wait. What you sayin'? You crazy man. I ain't never said my man needed child-size condoms! You nasty. Why you askin' bout the size of my slam-dumpster's dong?"

Katz sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose. "So, let me get this straight. You admit to robbing CVS at gunpoint--"

"YEET!"

"...and you admit you demanded 'child-size condoms'."

"Always, my G."

"... but they weren't for you."

"No way." Huggins crosses his arms and shakes his head hard enough for all five of his hair tendrils to sway. He pushes them back into place.

"So, they were for your friend?"

He nods.

"Your young friend?"

"You got it"

"Your, shall we say, 'child-sized' friend?"

"You a good lawyer. Did you go to school?"

"Who is not a child?"

"Homie, I could not have said that shit better myself. That is precisely how it went down. I'm glad we all agree. So, I can go home now?"

"No!" says Judge Sanders. "Do you even listen to yourself when you speak?"

"Why you gotta be such a bitch?" Huggins tried to throw a pen at her but missed by about five feet. He reached for another one, but it only flew three feet on account of it being on a chain. Farrelli sat at his table, his black hair twisting through his fingers. His back heaved and shook. It was impossible to tell if he was laughing or crying.

"One final question, Mr. Huggins, and excuse my indiscretion but, exactly how large is your friend's... how large is your friends...", he clears his throat. "Excuse me. How large is his penis?"

"Objection! Relevance?" Farrelli, forehead finally dry, manages. His kerchief tight in his hand, soggy with sweat, but found.

"I feel it's very relevant. We're trying to determine if Mr. Huggins' motive for robbing the CVS was to engage in intercourse with a child!"

"It wasn't a child! God damn, how many times I gotta tell you!" Huggins' face is red.

"Just someone with a child sized penis," Katz says to Farrelli.

"Overruled. Mr. Huggins, I too would like to know the size of your boyfriend's penis," says Judge Sanders.

"Well, for one thing, he ain't my boyfriend. He's more like a... what you call it? Like a friend with benefits? And I ain't talkin' 401k. I mean them *benefits*. For another, man, I don't like to kiss and tell, you know? But, man, I guess average—for someone his age," he clarifies.

"Which is?"

"Objection, asked and answered."

"Overruled, Mr. Huggins did not clearly answer the first time."

"Like I axed and answered before," says Huggins, smirking a little at his newly acquired vocabulary, "I don't know. Younger than me."

Katz sighs and looks down. "Your honor, I don't think the witness will cooperate enough for further questions to be useful. The prosecution rests." He unbuttons his coat and returns to his seat.

"Does the defense have a response?" asks Judge Sanders.

"Yes, your honor. I believe we do." Says Farrelli, the lunulae of sweat on his coat finally dry. "Mr. Huggins, would you care to tell the court the size of your penis?" A hush settles over the room. Time seems to stop.

"Heh, no, Tommy. I would not."

"Mr. Huggins, if you do not tell the court—and I remind you that you are under oath—if you do not tell the court the exact size of your penis—in imperial units, if you please—I will call for a mistrial! Now Alan, please, tell the good citizens of Virginia: how many inches long is your penis?"

Huggins crosses his arms and leans back in his chair.

"Eighteen inches." He winks at a young man in the jury.

"Mr. Huggins, we both know that isn't true. If you don't want life in prison you will tell the court how large your penis is right now."

"Bitch, I told you, my penis eighteen inches. You don't believe me, why don't you and Miss Sanders come over here and suck it right now." He stood up. "Hell man, I don't have to deal with this. I paid that cop back in '06 to keep me outta this shit! Fuck you guys. Fuck

you Miss Sanders. Fuck yo' saggy-ass titties and I fucked yo' husband. Fuck you Tommy. You not hot that's why your husband left, and I fucked him too, and fuck you, Mr. Bailiff!"

He leaps out of the witness box and runs for the door.

"And guess what?" he says, already feet from the exit. "Maybe I like my men to have li'l dongs! Maybe my man-size ass can't handle a hammer." He ducks a bailiff who tries to tackle him. "Maybe Mr. Katz don't believe my man has a little Lester because he so used to gettin' fucked down by bulls!" A state trooper pulls his taser before Huggins kicks him in the hand. The taser arcs through the air before it clatters on the tile floor and skitters under a row of seats. People in the audience are beginning to stand up. A few shuffle to the opposite sides of the room, but some tense up, glare at Huggins and move toward the center aisle. Murmurs fill the air. Not a few audience members decry the handgun ban in courtrooms.

"You guys wouldn't know a real man if he rammed you from both sides. Huggins out!" He runs to the door, but the mob surrounds him too quickly. The courtroom breaks into a frenetic mixing bowl of human bodies. The once silent sanctorum of justice is now louder than a Rush concert. He swings wildly, hitting an unlucky few. Something rattles on the floor, maybe a tooth. Huggins is just feet from emancipation, but the mob pulls back from all sides. He flails his fists and feet. With each whorl the glob of people glommed on grows in gall. It's like walking through tar. The sea of humans adhered to his body grows—an amoeba whose tendrils have him. In a last-ditch effort, he leaps.

He leaps and he soars, gruidaen above the lake of livid spectators—his freedom mere feet away, but when he alights from his avian journey, he feels a breeze on his balls. He's paralyzed. Two members of the audience now grip his pants and boxers in triumph. His penis, fully erect, stands proud. All two inches point like a gnarled, menacing finger at the crowd who exposed it.

Farrelli points to Huggins' babypenis. "Your honor, the defense would like to submit a new piece of evidence!" Katz wipes his slick forehead with the back of his sleeve.

“Accepted. Mr. Farrelli, I think this is a pretty open and shut case. In all my years as a judge for the commonwealth, I’m not sure I’ve ever seen a penis that small.” Huggins is at last detained before a flurry of police stream through the door. “I’m surprised child sized even fits it,” she mumbles to herself.

“Mr. Huggins,” she says after he is placed in cuffs and back in his seat at the front of the room. “I’m willing to dismiss this case if you apologize to the jury. What they had to witness today... it was horrible. Your penis is just awful.”

“Your honor!” Says Farrelli, disgusted. “I can’t believe you would say that.” He paces for a moment collecting his thoughts. “There’s no way they could have seen it; it’s just too small!”

“Mr. Farrelli, you’re right: it was quite small. I would be surprised if the people holding him could even make it out. Let the record show, the court finds Mr. Huggins’ penis too Lilliputian to litigate.” Farrelli nods. He shoots a big thumbs up to Huggins, and grins. This is the first case he’s ever won. Judge Sanders raises her gavel. “By the power vested in me by the Commonwealth of Virginia, I find Mr. Huggins not guilty.”

STILL LIFE OF THREE PEACHES ON A TABLE

CURLED AROUND HER ARM with a twist and pirouette, then dipping down like a gentle sigh before it returned up and into her pen, the surgical tubing traced its five-foot path. It pulled on her. Loose and warm, heavy and anguine it environed her arm, pulsing. She gripped the pen at the tubing's terminus, and watched it glide across the paper. It left thick red curves on the page below, controlled by something she couldn't quite perceive. The art show is tomorrow. The walls of Daisy's dorm, though obscured by darkness, sported paintings, drawings, and a single tapestry. None produced for pleasure, none for the sake of art. The latter, she produced in an elective last semester that she had no interest in whatsoever—the school seemed to think would make her more well-rounded.

For reasons known only to the dean of the Wallace School of Art & Design, all students had to take three different kinds of art classes outside of their major, and she had already taken photography. That meant the only options that remained were

sculpture, collage, glass working, multimedia or tapestry. Really, these were no options at all.

Sculpture was taught by a TA she used to date and subsequently cheated on who also, at least according to a very reliable source, would be in attendance in the collage class. Glass working was frequented entirely by potheads whose final projects all looked mysteriously functional as smoking apparatus—abstract-expressionist and *De Stijl* coloring seemingly always on a stemmed bowl. It was a miracle how few projects in that class were turned in without brownish tar caked into them already; it wasn't a mystery why so many were. Occasionally these students would focus their work on subject matter more phallically oriented, equally functional, but in greater varieties of color and fewer varieties of shape. Neither glass-based onanism nor cannabis consumption interested her in particular, so her only remaining option involved slaving over a goddamn loom for three months just to produce a one-foot by one-foot square of fabric. Her final product, a tapestry depicting likeness of a lamb which her professor described as “wonderfully traumatic”. She was awarded a C-. The lamb stared at her from the wall watching in silent judgment as she worked on her multimedia final project. The art show is tomorrow.

She bore down hard on the pen, spraying fast, frantic lines across the top before slowing down again in an attempt to render a blotchy, red self-portrait. The pigment hit the page and spread like watercolor, thin around the edges with streaks. She wondered if this would be better than her piece for the interim art show.

For that, Daisy had glued hair all over a canvas, in a frenetic, misshapen blob. The thing that clung to the canvas was made up of browns and reds and blacks and blondes, all jutting out angrily. It looked calico, and at parts, hairs attached to the canvas reached so far outward, one could pet it like a Persian cat. More discerning viewers noticed some hairs were far curlier than the others, and Daisy always suspected, though she never actually confronted her donors, but she always suspected that one, or probably several of her friends had in fact secretly given her pubes to work with. She didn't let this faze her, however; she was no stranger to pubes for the sake of art.

Professor Brombakas had just a few more students to judge before it would be her turn. He was talking to a tall, thin boy in front of a large-scale print of an anime girl. It was the kind of print with those stretched out circles of paint to represent shading, like an old magazine—an ersatz, enlarged comic strip. However, on closer inspection, Daisy noticed the smiling image of the innocent Japanese schoolgirl was a gestalt of hundreds of thousands of small cutouts of the same character wearing little to no clothing.

“This is very impressive,” Brombakas told the artist. He began pointing to specific wads of hentai glued to the canvas and asking about the artist’s cutting and pasting technique. His massive, sausagey finger with its flakey dry cracks and dirty nails extended toward a particularly impressive glob of pages. His finger was trained on the breast of one of the miniature characters that made up the portrait, pointing almost exactly at her nipple. But as he circumscribed the glob of papers, his finger drew a larger radius and it was clear this was just a happy accident. Daisy was nearly sick watching this old man comment on this weird kid’s porn papier-mache. She just focused on standing in front of her hair collage.

When Professor Brombakas finally arrived to give his official comment, he looked at her multimedia fiasco inquisitively for a moment. He stroked his scraggly beard and adjusted his glasses. He scrutinized a certain concavity in the hair. As he did so he held his glasses in front of his eyes but did not put them on, before dropping them back down to hang limp on their chain. He said, “hair has been done,” and turned away.

“That’s it?” asked Daisy.

“That’s it,” said the professor, still facing away from her. He gave a lazy, half-turn back to say over his shoulder, “It’s exploitative, it has nothing to say, and worst of all, it’s unpleasant and not intentionally. I’m sorry. It’s just objectively bad.”

“I spent weeks on this!”

“Well, that’s a shame,” he said. “Time does not guarantee quality. You have to learn this, Daisy. It was the same when you showed that huge wax sculpture you made out of candle drippings.

Just because something took you a long time, doesn't make it good. You have to put something of yourself into it."

She got a C on that project. She was given a C for three straight months of finding hair—not an easy task—and carefully gluing each one, one at a time to a canvas. She affixed literally hundreds of thousands of human hairs to a canvas, for what probably amounted to three-thousand hours, for a C. She spent sleepless nights, making absolutely certain that the glob of hairs was perfect. She studied not a few Kandinsky and Calder pieces, in meticulous study of ideal geometric layout and color. She spent days in libraries, and art museums and went to a really dreadful art talk by some no-name, just because he claimed to be the master of the "aesthetics of the globular form", all so she could get a C. A goddamn C. The art show is tomorrow, and she would sooner die than get another C.

EACH CURVE AND GRADE AND DECLIVITY of each individual hair on the peach had to be drawn. Brian was sure, if he didn't, someone would notice. There was always one professor, one smart-ass judge at the art shows who would look at a piece he had poured weeks into and asked some inane, nit-picky, bullshit question like, "why didn't you add the stubble on that man's beard? What did you mean by this?" Even worse were questions like, "what emotions were you attempting to convey when you decided to make the grass in the background a blur but drew every hair on the farmer's head? Why the juxtaposition?" He could never betray the genuine answer, so instead, he would say his intent was, "to draw the viewer's focus", or "to highlight the subject's importance." In reality, it was because he had either not noticed himself, or simply run out of time.

His hand was beginning to cramp. The triple-zero brush his mother brought home from her trip to Japan was nice, but its ergonomics left something to be desired. An onyx handle with barely a whisker on the end, perfect for hyper-fine details. The "nip nib" his

mom had called it, much to his embarrassment in front of his Korean roommate. He stood up from his desk, wiped it off, and went into the kitchen for a beer.

There was something about beer in a glass that was just different—classier maybe. It made him feel better about drinking on a school night. Made him feel more like an Ernest Hemingway-type than a wino. He popped open the bottle and threw the cap into a clear container near overflowing with the same. His roommate demanded he save them for some spurious “art project” that was still in the getting high and thinking about it phase. Sedated, he walked back. The cool glass soothed his hand and his mind. Suddenly he didn’t really care if he finished drawing every spectral vellus on the peach. It was honestly good enough as it was. And the judges always found something about his pictures to cavil, so why bother? If he did a perfect job on the peach, then the picayune assholes would find something in the background, and if there was nothing there to chide, it was “too realistic”, and they’d ask why he didn’t just take a picture if he was going to do that. No one appreciated quality.

He peeked into David’s door. It was exactly midway between the kitchen and his room. David was sitting at his computer, half looking at the screen as he idly scrolled through someone’s twitter account.

“Finished your project already?” Brian asked.

“No, not yet. I’m still in the research process,” he said. “Before I can really get moving on it, I always like to kinda, I dunno, saturate myself with the subject matter. Otherwise, I leave room for error. I guess I’m kind of a perfectionist.”

David was an abstract expressionist. His paintings were just pigment flung on to canvas, as far as Brian could tell, totally haphazardly. He had to take a class in this sort of thing once. Every week he was expected to turn in a new art piece that evoked such and such emotion, but it wasn’t allowed to contain any form. He just painted a few lines in random colors each time and got through with the easiest A he’d ever received. It felt a little like cheating that they were allowed to stand in front of the class and explain their piece. For each project due, Brian delivered an increasingly more palaverous

speech, explaining how the crisscrossing lines of paint symbolized racial tension, or depression, or both (the profs loved that). David's room was adorned with myriad splattered canvases whose meanings were either too abstruse for Brian, or vacant altogether. Collectively, they represented maybe two hours of work. He scoffed and walked back to his room.

David continued scrolling through his ex-girlfriend's Twitter feed. How is it that after 6 years he still thought about her? This account was old and hadn't been updated in years. He discovered it totally by chance while typing in her email to random internet services, a habit he picked up earlier in college. It was weird and creepy, he knew, and every time he did it, he vowed never to do it again. This is the type of crap stalkers do. This is what particularly licentious serial killers do before they kill victims for not loving them after one date and he did it at least once a semester. And every time he did it, he swore to himself, this was the last time, and in the end he always deleted the little note file he made full of punctilious details on these girls online personae. And every time, he vowed with greater intent than before, never again. Yet, his computer was open, and he devoured her cyber corpus.

He was at the point in the cycle right now where he felt a knot in the pit of his stomach and rage that he couldn't quite pinpoint. Maybe because she was happy? But that didn't make sense. Maybe he was angry at himself for leaving? This was the exact headspace he needed to be in to paint. His arms were covered in goosebumps and his head was swirling with fleeting, abstract thoughts that he desperately needed to make concrete. His first stroke was an angry slash of red that cut through the pristine white of his canvas. Trying to convey stuff like this was near impossible through conversation. The problem with sincerity was it seems to come with a lot of paradox. He had to cut through endless piles of cognitive dissonance to definitively say anything. At least with paint and abstraction, he could put ideas next to each other, even if their union was absurd.

Free from the bounds of form, emotion ran through his paint. He allowed feeling to build shape, and intensity to be conveyed with

color. He hated himself. He hated the one-sided bond he refused to break with anyone who ever showed him affection. He cut another line through the canvas, this time in black. Everyone romanticizes their first love after the fact. He wasn't special, he realized this—so why couldn't he let it go? He splattered his painted hand across the canvas in a percussive slap. Paint arced in a Newtonian, parabolic dance. She talked about him online, at least she used to, and she didn't think he'd ever find it. That was the only way to really know what someone thinks about you, right? And she waxed nostalgic as much as he did, but with more anger than his maudlin regret. And why shouldn't she? He was shitty. He treated the only person who ever loved the real him like trash and discarded her because he was bored. He craved what she later, in a regrettable post-sunder *coup d'un soir*, aptly described as, "the thrill of the chase".

He gave the canvas an artful, but not serene slash with a nearby box cutter. But then again, did he really love her? Because, and at least this was just his experience, as soon as you have sex with someone for the first time, you usually say it, but most times you really mean "I love this". But then, what does it even mean to love anyone, really. Is just feeling it in the moment different than its actual meaning? The same way people will say, "I'm starving" when they literally mean they're hungry? He flicked vibrant paint off his fingers and speckled the darker regions with color in a controlled, Pollockian motion. Maybe the first time you fall in love with someone, like real love, something changes in your brain. The first hit is always the best one, after all, so the rest of your life, anyone else you love—or think you love—is just a comparison to that first person, like a Platonic shadow. Of course, every now and again, someone comes along and becomes the new ideal, or so they say. But people make it seem like everyone should be that idyllic. So, is every relationship supposed to be an upgrade? That's not sustainable, and what if he already peaked? Something other than him seemed to guide his hand for a final, pensive brush stroke, before he marked it finished.

He looked at the monstrosity he created. The air was thick with the musty smell of paint made aerosol by violence. Each breath tasted chalky. Hanging paint particles covered his tongue like a thick,

wool blanket. The thing he created was sickly green with black lines dripping down into a brown-blue ombre with a blush of rosy pink at the top. He saw that she was happy, and with someone. Someone who wasn't him who made her happy, maybe happier than he did. There was an amoebic blot of red in the blue base of the painting. Most colors were fuzzy and formless. Warm like a womb that he could retreat to. Warm like the past, save for the sharp, fast lines of angry black and red that cut across. He felt a wetness on his cheeks, not sweat, maybe paint. Probably paint. Just looking at this thing made him well up with anger and regret, and fear for the future with just a tinge of happiness that was more like a longing for a forgotten memory. He dropped his paintbrush. At least he was finished. The art show is tomorrow.

ALEX TOOK A LONG SIP of a bitter concoction of dregs collected from countless bottles in his closet. It was gross, but it was alcohol. He was alone in his room with the lights turned off, swaddled in a heap of blankets staring into the darkness. A slim rectangle of light cut through the darkness of his room—a few spare rays of light bouncing through cracks in his door. He cut his throat on another sharp sip. He was beginning to feel warm, hot even, under his blanket.

He didn't drink before college. He used to think it was bad for you. When he started, he thought it was sad to drink alone, unlike getting high, oddly. He used to be creative, and fun, and cool. He used to be a chilled-out pothead wook who was too cool for any job that required a tie. Now, if he smoked anything while he was drunk, it made him dizzy, and he was so rarely not drunk he just stopped smoking. He had to get a job as a temp—don't even ask about the tie situation—and when it released its death grip on him at 5 PM sharp, it left him too enervated to do much more than sit in his dorm in a

drunken torpor. Getting wasted alone was a weird, cathartic experience, made all the more cathartic because no one he cared about knew.

At some point, he noticed it's nearly impossible for anyone to know your actual, true internal state. No one can tell by looking at you how you're feeling as long as you just pretend to be happy—he had the sneaking suspicion everyone knew this, and everyone was pretending—and then at some point, you can just say fuck it, and be whatever you want to be, at least on the exterior. What difference does it make?

Through a long process of hepatological stress-testing and yogi-like mental exercise he had mastered a technique that allowed him to get blackout drunk and feel close to nothing, while his exterior was exactly as his sober self pretended to be. He took another sip. It was kind of nice though, to be totally shitfaced, and have no one know. If they didn't know, it didn't really matter, it wasn't real to them. Sure his liver was calcifying and he probably reeked of liquor all the time, and sometimes he had to recuse himself to the lavatory so he could perform a furtive emesis, but those things were just extensions of his internal state, and to an outsider, hints of it at best. It's like pain. The word only describes the external response to a painful action. The English word "pain" has less to do with whatever qualia one experiences when in pain, and more to do with the act that causes it, or one's reactions to such an experience. Unless someone explicitly tells you, if they aren't making any indication of it, and you didn't just witness them being injured, it's impossible to know if someone's in pain. Describing someone as drunk really means they look drunk or someone has witnessed them drinking in excess. If you don't look drunk, then you aren't according to the strictest structuralist arguments. (Though Wittgenstein may agree with his thesis, the police officers and judge did not when he gave this drunken spiel at his DUI hearing five years later. Though the prosecutor was a little impressed).

He should really be working on this project thing; it's due tomorrow morning. Eric finished his weeks ago, at least he thought he had. It's hard to remember. But then again, why bother? That would require getting up, leaving his warm blanket, and shambling downstairs in front of his easel. He didn't think he could draw a straight line right now, much less paint one. Hell, he wasn't sure if he even had any paint. He took another drink. Stuff like this always seemed to work out anyway, so he pushed it out of his mind.

Across the glowing corridor, his roommate stared intently at an art book he had purchased. The layman may describe it as "pornographic", "lewd", even "perverted", but he didn't see it that way. The human body, and especially the nude human body, is a work of art. It has gorgeous curves and delicate grades of hue. It's shapely, and challenging. It's the obsessive subject of Degas and Botticelli, both of whom drew them with gusto. Evolutionarily speaking, the human body is the platonic ideal of beauty. Symmetry, distaste for gore, pareidolia, these things all stem from a human's ability to distinguish a suitable mate from the pack. Aesthetic beauty and sex appeal are inseparably intertwined. For all of these reasons, Eric was up at 2 AM, the night before the senior art show, lost in a deep study of Japanese cartoon pornography.

Drawing porn isn't as easy as most people think. For one, it's very easy to stray too far from the limits of human anatomy. One can only draw breasts so large before they become grotesque. There's actually quite a bit of prudence and a real discipline required to draw a tasteful and effective adult cartoon, and Eric should know. Not many western students get into a school this prestigious drawing Japanese-style cartoons. The fact that he was accepted—not to mention the scholarships and immediate inundations from professors begging to mentor him—meant he was one of the best in America, if not the world. There were research papers and articles in snooty magazines written about him before he was eighteen. He was

interviewed by Sotheby's (by an intern but it was still pretty cool) about how he was "testing the limits of voluptuousity" with his art. He was told he could study whatever he wanted and was given complete freedom the moment he stepped into his freshman classes—a liberty that was promptly supplanted by tyranny.

During his very first semester, for his inaugural project, he drew what he believed to be his best work yet, depicting the ancient Japanese legend of *Akkorokamui*. Without getting into details—and really, for a piece like this one, it's impossible to capture the sheer expansive quiddity of the thing. One just has to behold it—the painting involved a Japanese businesswoman in an exquisitely crenulated skirt, a poly-tentacled monster of decidedly Dedalian detail, and some of the most intimidatingly involute fluid renderings many of the professors had ever seen. It was a technical masterpiece, but he received a D. In the critique notes, Professor Hurley said it was "more concupiscent than is reasonably appropriate, even for an art institution," and that he needed to, "please refrain from depicting penetration of any form." They were a bunch of prudes. But those prudes determined his future career in the art world, so he censored himself.

Eric's final project loomed over his desk. It was okay. Aesthetically speaking it was good; it was an oil painting of a field at sunset, with a whole village drawn going about their business. It took him months to complete, though when he looked at it, he felt barely a scintilla of passion. He was sure it would get an A; it hit every box on the unofficial rubric. It implemented every oil technique they had gone over, it was exhaustively detailed, there was nothing kitschy or cliché going on, and most importantly—apparently—it contained no "licentious depictions". It wasn't porn. Eric sighed. On the aisle was an easy A, no risk, but ultimately no reward. The thing was prosaic, apathy-inducing. On the other hand, the porn study he had started was, in his opinion, one of the most impressive, technically proficient, and possibly metaphysical form-like works he had ever created—the

absolute platonic ideal of eroticism. At least it would be if he kept working on it, he was sure. Yet, because of the school's Mussolinic regulations, he could never show it.

"Hey man," came a voice from the hall. "Can I borrow some blue paint?"

A CACOPHONOUS DIN EMANATED from David's room. Brian could hear it even through the brick wall. He must have finally started his project. His empty cup rattled on his desk. It mirrored every clap and boom David made. Brian was trying to relax, but the pachydermophonics of his roommate's "creative process" made it difficult to say the least. There was a long silence, then a tinny slap followed by what sounded like a handful of rice skittering across the ground. He had to get out of here, or he was going to lose it.

He stepped outside and reached for a cigarette. He hated smoking, but he also couldn't stop. He started when he was fourteen, when he was accidentally gifted a carton at a Christmas white elephant and his parents were too drunk to remember the next day. After that, he snuck around, smoking on the rarest of occasions, only when he was sure his parents wouldn't notice, or be within smelling distance of his clothes. Back then he took care that the cigarette was always downwind of him, so only the minimum volume of smoke

would caress his jacket. He would blow upward, sure to face the sky so the smoky tendrils wouldn't float up through his hair and tinge it with that heavy, earthy smell. A smell he knew would be invisible to him, but ubiquitous to everyone else. He used to be so good at this the only part of him the smoke touched was his lungs.

He exhaled, and the cloud washed over his face. It burned his eyes. He was hoping this would relax him, maybe ease his stress; he was still stressed, but now he was out of breath too. Why was he doing worse here than David? His paintings were always so chaotic. They were insane, and their meaning was totally opaque. How was it that David was about to graduate *magna cum laude* while he, a deft, skilled craftsman, was barely scraping by? What did the teachers see in David's amorphous, graceless paintings that was absent in his own? Details take time! Hours of careful study, intensive practice, painful cramps in his hand from sitting there drawing brick after brick, hair after hair. The sum total of his thousands of hours at painting was apparently quality no greater than throwing paint at a canvas for thirty minutes.

"Sure it's technically proficient, but why did you paint this?" a professor once asked him.

"Because... you assigned us to paint a portrait." The rubric only said they needed to paint someone and "capture them vividly", so he painted his girlfriend, pretty well he thought, from a photo she sent him. It wasn't great, but it was far better than the finger paintings his classmates had turned in.

"See, that's the problem," Prof. Okter said. "You're very gifted at putting paint down in a way that imitates life, but it has to mean something too, otherwise why did you make it?"

There were a lot of things he wanted to say, but with his grade barely floating above C-level, he thought better of it.

"Look," Okter said. He pulled up a Klimt painting on his phone, *Portrait of Adel Bloch-Bauer I*—the so-called lady in gold. "What does this look like to you?"

He stared at it, already familiar with it from his art-history class. A china doll-like lady was enshrouded in an aurulent dress which seemed to meld into the wall and consume the canvas. The

dress itself was covered in odd, squarish things that suggested it was quilted, or otherwise made of pricey textile parts. It was asthenopic.

"Honestly? It's a little cartoony," Brian said. "The rendering of her face looks a little fake. It's too smooth, or rosy or something. And he didn't even finish her chest. It's far less detailed than the rest of the portrait. And I always found Klimt's style a little distracting. She's barely the subject, the gaudy dress is."

"Exactly!" Okter said. "Sure, it's gaudy, but she's an aristocrat and that's what he was trying to capture. That's why it's the subject. She takes up space not with her person, but with her things! He's showing us what kind of person she is, not just what she looks like. She's small and frail, but at the same time, her wealth literally makes her big, all encompassing. She swallows up the entire canvas with a material expression of her wealth. And you know what? We have pictures of what Adele actually looked like, and it's nothing like this portrait. She was fatter, and less attractive, and didn't dress like that, really. But he wasn't just taking a photo of her in paint. She was rich! She could have, and did have people take photos of her. Klimt is a painter, not a photographer, so he captured in paint something people felt when they saw her. That's what makes it a good portrait."

"You can draw me a photorealistic image of someone, but if it doesn't capture that aura about them, I don't want to see it. Your paintings have to have a reason to exist, a message. I want to feel something when I look at it, not just learn what your model looks like. I don't want you to turn in descriptions of people, I need you to turn in an analysis. Do you see what I'm saying?"

He exhaled a spectral cloud. It was swept up into the summer night breeze and dissolved into the stars above. The cigarette was finished. He flicked it and headed inside, a little calmer. It was a cliché, sure, but maybe, just maybe, this time a student did know more than his teachers. After all, objectively, putting time into art had to make it good, right? Otherwise what was all of this for? Tibetan monks know this. They spend weeks and weeks drawing intricate paintings with sand only to wipe it all away when they finish. The whole point of that exercise is that nothing, no matter how beautiful, can ever last. Did they just throw sand on a rock for thirty minutes

and call it done? Of course not! They squatted for days and days carefully positioning miniscule colored grains of sand all to symbolize something beautiful. The price for beauty is time.

As soon as he heard the door slam shut, David shouted.

"Brian! Did you get this email?"

"What email?"

"About the excellence in painting thing!" He ran out of his room and found Brian halfway through the process of removing his shoes. He inspected David's paint-smeared face.

"No, did they just send out the finalists?"

"They did!" David bounced, unable to stand still. This award was given to ten Seniors each year. The winners had their student debt forgiven and their art placed in a juried gallery. David knew he was a finalist already, at least his teachers said so. They all said really good things about *Composition #14*, a piece he particularly killed himself over. For that, he sat in a bathtub full of salt and ice until his lips turned blue, his hands were pruned and trembled, and his scrotum was so shriveled it felt like his balls were shrink wrapped to his groin. When he successfully got his internal temperature to 80 degrees, he dipped his whole hand in warm finger paint and covered the canvas in Rorschach-esque smears. The whole time he was trying to keep the abstract concept of a near death experience in mind, and according to the first three professors who saw it, it read. He nearly lost a toe for that, not to mention his body entering shock as soon as his hand hit the hot paint. When he finished, he collapsed and was hospitalized for several weeks with pneumonia, but man, was that a good painting.

Brian said, "So? Obviously, there's some news. Were either of our names on the list?" He was now smiling too, probably wondering about his hyper-realistic painting of a woman showering that he portrayed through the reflection on a spigot.

"Yes! Well, sorta," he couldn't keep it in any longer. "I won! I fucking won!" He leapt into the air and laughed uncontrollably. "I couldn't believe it! I mean I didn't read the whole list, but once I saw my name, I dropped everything. You're the first person I told. I

cannot believe it!" He wiped away a tear squeezed out from his laughter. "Oh my god. It's such a relief. I never thought I'd make it!"

"Well shit! I gotta see that list!" said Brian. He bolted to his room, whatever tension he felt earlier completely forgotten, and snapped open his laptop. "I don't see anything!" he called out to Brian. His monitor was full of read emails about the power bill, spam from various social media sites, and something from his dad that he forgot to reply to, but there was nothing about an award.

"Did you try searching it?" asked David, now standing over his shoulder.

He tried, but again nothing came up.

"Try searching 'congratulate', or something. It said something like, 'congratulate the following students' before the list of people. I think everyone got it."

He did, but the only result was a message from a seedy male vitality company that wanted to congratulate him, as apparently his days of overpaying for Viagra were over.

"Oh shit," said David. "I'm sorry man, I misread it." He was looking at his email on his phone now. "It said, 'congratulations' and then a list of the winners." He put his phone away. "I think they only sent it to... the people who won."

"Oh," said Brian. "Well, congratulations then." He eased his laptop lid back down, and it sighed a gentle poof of air as it closed. "I'm really happy for you."

David's face returned to a piggish grin. "Thanks! I'm so excited! I really can't believe it, I mean I never thought it would be me, but I guess the teachers--"

"Sorry, I have to finish my thing for tomorrow," Brian said, interrupting David's ebullient logorrhea.

"Oh! Oh, yeah of course!" He turned around to leave the room. "Okay, I guess I'm gonna turn in then. I'll see you at the art show!" He left and closed the door.

Brian sat silently in his chair and stared at the wall behind his desk. He felt a tightness in his stomach, restlessness, but he couldn't move. It was like a fist in his gut, pulling him, but he didn't know in

what direction. It felt like something was pushing up in the back of his throat, something deep within him and he was forcing it back. He reopened his email and checked the spam filter. He hit refresh a few times, but it seemed more likely that the award eluded him than the email.

His paintings, windows to other worlds with high-definition clarity, stared down at him from the walls seeming to mock him. His stupid, waste-of-time-painting of those hyper realistic peaches dried on the easel beside him. Each hour he spent painting it, it grew a pound in weight, and it was finally going to fall and crush him. Each pain-stakingly intentional stroke of his single haired brush, no, his extra fine tipped single hair brush, each track of pigment left by the nip nib all but grew off the painting and pushed him into the wall. Every painting in the room was a milestone for hundreds of hours closer to the grave—hours he could have spent with friends, family, girls, but he chose not to because he thought his time was worth something. Not receiving this award was just the newest of the innumerable ways the art community had found to tell him that his time was worthless. That his effort was wasted, or worse, nugatory.

Brian was surrounded by idyllic paintings, but they brought no serenity. His internal temperature spiked by two full degrees. He was sweating but felt cold. Professors told him his work contained no passion? Fine. He picked up a brush, broad and bristling, rough-hewn, meant for scraggly outlines of shrubbery, but he supposed it didn't matter. David never used the correct tools, and his art was apparently renowned. Thirty minutes of his time were considered excellent painting, but a month of his own was execrable. He thrust the brush into a bucket of red paint and smeared a rough gash across a peach. Paint dripped and left behind thin red trails perpendicular to the floor. But one line isn't enough; his professors demand passion! In one motion, he slung the whole bucket of paint straight into the canvas. The moment it collided with the trampoline-like stretched canvas, an arc slopped from the bucket and sprayed the peaches with a mist of red flecks. After the bucket rebounded off the taught canvas, it crashed into the floor concluding its flight with an explosive burst expelling the rest of its contents into his carpet.

He looked at what remained of his painting. Two photorealistic peaches, and a giant ball of red paint that festered like an oozing sore nestled between them. The retching sensation in his gut and tightness in his chest didn't leave. He breathed in shudders as his vision clouded, but he refused to let himself cry. He held it in. The art show is tomorrow.

ERIC RUMMAGED THROUGH HIS ART SUPPLY DESK for a while before he found a full tube of phthalo blue hidden away behind a stack of palette knives. "Here," he said. "It's about half full. But this is my good oil stuff, you'll have to pay me back, okay?"

"Hell yeah," said Alex. "Thanks!" He snatched the paint and asked, "Hey, is that what you're turning in for the thing tomorrow?" He motioned toward the nondescript painting of the village at dusk.

"I guess so."

He stared at it for a little while and rubbed his chin. He squinted his eyes. "It's alright," said Alex, slurring his words ever so slightly, but not enough for Eric to notice. He continued more carefully, "but it doesn't look like your normal stuff."

"Do you not like it?"

"No, no I do! I mean look at it! It's awesome. I really like that sfumato action you've got going on in the distance too. Shit's Da Vinci

as fuck. But I mean," he groped for the right words. "Where's the anime titties?"

Eric laughed. "I'm not allowed anymore, remember? They almost expelled me for painting *Akkorokamui* and *The Virgin*."

"Dude, that's so not cool. I'm not gonna lie, that's the first oil painting I ever jacked off to."

Eric was a little embarrassed to learn this. Not because it was gross, but because he felt so much pride. He laughed a little more awkwardly than he intended. "Thanks man."

"Hold up, what's that?" Alex asked. He pointed at the enormous study of *Seikatsu Shidou* half complete, consuming all of Eric's desk. "Dude! This is hot! And I'm not just saying man, this is really, really hot stuff. I've got a semi just glancing at it." He snapped a picture of it with his phone "For later," he explained. "Why the heck aren't you submitting this?"

"I don't know man," Eric said. "It's the last graded thing, and I'm just trying to get out of here with a C." He looked at the bland, expertly painted image of the field. It dried perfectly—no cracks, no smudges. "I mean, it's an easy A, right?"

Alex followed his gaze. "I guess you're right. Why risk an easy A?" He thought for a second. "Lemme know when you finish that asian shit though. Looks a lot hotter." He jammed the tube of paint into his pocket and walked out. "Thanks again!" he said, and he was gone.

Eric returned to his drawing. It was at that critical stage where if he devoted the rest of the night to it, he could have it finished by morning. He could do it for sure if he really pounded caffeine, and maybe popped a few of those little white pills he bought. He got them under the auspices of partying, but really, he used them for the impetus needed to draw each individual pube on each individual Japanese school girl—he was no stranger to pubes for the sake of art. With the right mix of legal and illegal stimulants, just maybe he could muster up the energy he needed to power through this thing. In its current form, it was a rough outline of what would be a polyptych, with seven panels. Each detailed an act more depraved than the last.

He looked again at his droll painting, then to his incomplete study, then he washed down two pills. A swig of cold coffee, 100mg of methylphenidate HCl, and he was ready to work.

The manga-influence in his painting was obvious, but he was doing a reimagining of the traditional comic strip in a more medieval style. He eschewed the convention of rectangular panels, going against the Eastern tradition—though interestingly, renaissance-style triptychs were popular during the Edo period of Japan, an unrelated cultural parallel in a totally isolated society—in favor of a more arcane, Western interpretation. He was reusing an old project from a line drawing class: seven arches drawn across a long sheet of butcher paper. Each arch was fabulously ornate, though none more so than the central arch. The assignment suggested each student made arches that “reflected their personalities”. They were probably hoping the students would hide little personal items in the ivy that wrapped each column, preferably something along the lines of a favorite baseball card, or an article of clothing the student especially liked. Something like a logo to a shoe company, or maybe a video game controller; you know, something personal that made the student unique and special. Eric drew genitals.

He wasn't trying to be crass, or contrarian, he just felt like the thing that made him “special and unique” was his uncanny ability to draw the human form—the whole human form—and he wasn't afraid to show it. Well, he was a little afraid to show it, so in the middle of each arch, where a keystone would go if they were constructed, he wrote out the Japanese characters that proudly proclaimed *hentai manga o kaku*. He hoped this was conspicuous enough to draw the attention away from the garden of dicks sprouting from the pubic forest of ivy between the letters, the breast-studded columns separating panels, the rather vaginal (but only if one looked very, very closely) V's where columns met. It was rewarded a B, and there was no mention of the penis forest in the critique notes.

So far, the drawing was nearly perfect. He would never say it himself, but it was turning out to be his magnum opus. An opusculé at the very least. It wasn't just porn, nothing he drew ever was regardless of how the faculty used it (a troubling fact revealed to him

through several late-night emails years later. Though he was never upset by the knowledge a close mentor had brought himself, or more rarely herself, to orgasm to his work — what higher praise can an artist receive, really — he was just annoyed with how low they graded it at the time). What he was drawing was art. Each wing of the polyptych depicted a college-aged student in varying stages of nudity, being penetrated by at least one, but on average far more foreign objects. Always, their mouth completely filled by an unspecified phallic shape. These shapes belonging to not a few members of the Wallace school's faculty who, if one was familiar with the faculty directory, could be individually identified. They lurked in the umbrous background. Members of the school bore a saintly nimbus about their heads, awarded to them for their successful efforts to silence the students. Surrounding each student-teacher pair, beautifully rendered liquids slicked the ground, fractal forests and Escherian architecture framed each subject with balance and poise. Each frame felt as if it were a picture of an infinitely complex scenario. To behold it was an experience somehow richer and more real than looking out of a window. Eric had managed to draw all of this detail in two hours of restive fury on the ragged edge of sanity. He was nearly finished.

In the center panel, the one traditionally reserved for Jesus Christ himself, Eric depicted Dr. Abernathy, the chair of the visual arts department. His swollen face intercalated between labyrinthian folds of neck fat and a lattice of crow's-feet. It was mordant in its accuracy and its cruelty. He was the source of the many non-descript black tendrils that gagged students in adjacent panels. He loomed large in the frame pushing at the edges which seemed to buckle and warp around his massive figure. He was surrounded by a shimmering aureola. A fleet of select faculty members drawn both cherubic and chibi swarmed around him like flies. One such angelic instructor was Professor Hurley. Eric drew him in a manner that was, "more concupiscent than is reasonably appropriate, even for an art institution." He finished the delicate details of the professor's Lilliputian reproductive region and put his brush down. Rich with meaning, rendered with the technique of a master, at once a visual poem and a polemic, a work that he could be proud of, that only he

could make, that demonstrated profound skill and intention, made in just three hours, a fecund garden of genitalia, his masterpiece was complete.

Alex is wasted right now. He's doing something, but he's not quite sure what. He hopes it's painting, because the art show is tomorrow.

THE FULL MOON AND HER DESK LAMP were the only things that illuminated Daisy's room. Little moving shadows muddled her walls, projections of her curtain oscillating gently in the artificial wind of her A/C. She had been working non-stop on her self-portrait for 6 straight hours. The 2A0 paper she was working on was swollen with cross hatches, stippling, meticulous texture renderings, the works. Maybe six hours would be a long time for the layman or neophyte, but Daisy was neither. God forbid she put a great deal of time into something. God forbid she actually try. She slashed the paper with her modified fountain pen and stained little sanguine lines into the page. The pen was the real art project.

Getting phlebotomy equipment was easy. A friend who had long ago given up on art school, now worked for the Red Cross. Apparently, his years of studying anatomy and gesture sketching gave him the proper skills for more than just his failed comic series. According to the recruiter, that was a skill that set him apart from the

premed applicants. It was a shame he didn't stay in the art world. He had this uncanny ability to remember exactly where every part of the human body was, and not just superficially. When he drew an arm, he didn't just draw a forearm, and a hand; he drew every single vein, tendon, and muscle in that arm exactly where they needed to be. So now, instead drawing veins on arms, he draws blood from them. For a small bribe—though, sexual favors cannot be considered gifts, and therefore cannot be used as evidence of bribery in a strict legal sense—he pocketed one of Red Cross' 17-gauge needles for her. It's not like anyone would notice one needle missing from a sharps container; he just saved it from the incinerator.

Once she had the needle, she connected it to a syringe, which connected to the surgical tubing, which ultimately fed into her pen's inkwell. It wasn't hard. As long as her blood pressure was high, the ink would flow. Getting her blood pressure up was as simple as eating nothing but steak and fries for the week before, as well as smoking not a few cigars in the hours leading up to her drawing. She threw up halfway through the first cigar—the flavor was pretty noxious as a result of her steak-and-fries-only diet—so now in addition to her mouth and hands and clothes stinking of that earthy, metallic smell of burnt tobacco, she reeked of vomit. It was really quite noisome and permeated the whole floor and seemed to really piss off her neighbors whose collective noses crinkled the minute she reentered the building. But she was stoic about the whole thing. She was no stranger to suffering for the sake of her art.

The only part of the project that had thus far caused Daisy any stress was finding a vein. She never paid much attention during her anatomy classes, instead opting to work on performance art ideas in her notebook. As a result, it was a total enigma which arm she was supposed to prick, and how deep it needed to be. Let's not forget that when she did figure out the correct arm (turns out either one works) she somehow pierced the tendon at the pit of her elbow and sent a shockwave of pins and needles all the way up her arm. The pit of that elbow was now shadowed by a growing piebald pool of subcutaneous blood. It was unpleasant. But of course, she ripped out

the needle, and uttered a Little-Engine-That-Couldish proverb before sticking her arm again, this time with proper form. Her ink flowed.

The surgical tubing was still turgid with her blood even this late into the night. She was a little worried about how long she could keep this up. This was the kind of project that had to be done quickly. She just had to work in some details. A blotch of freckles on the cheeks, a few tight spiderwebs of hairs flying away from the head, but it was close to done. She felt as though she had been working on this for days but, of course, it had only been a few hours since she began. In the past, her professors had critiqued her works for having no meaning, no substance, but they just didn't get it.

When she made a collage of Mahatma Gandhi's likeness out of feces and porno magazines, she wasn't just "trying to shock them", she was shaking their whole foundation of morality. The point wasn't to be shocking, it was to change their views of reverence. It was to challenge the way society canonized figures like Gandhi, how they were made completely untouchable. Personally, she had no qualms with the man—well, she heard that he slept with preteen girls, or was pro-slavery or something, but she couldn't remember who told her that—but she was pretty sure he needed to be critiqued. Hence, the poop-porn-portrait.

And there's nothing easy about a poop-portrait, by the way. She wasn't some sort of perverted shit-charlatan who collected abandoned turds from dingy bathrooms in seedy bars, fecklessly flinging fistfuls of feces at the canvas with reckless abandon. She produced the materials herself. That kind of dedication took time, a body-destroying diet, and a thoroughly addlepatated restroom schedule such that no nugget—or in this case "drop" would be more apposite; the consistency needed to be closer to soup, or at least pudding—of evacuated material was wasted. The sheer intensity that went into it was completely lost on the judges. All they could see was the result.

It was growing harder for Daisy to keep her eyes open. According to her clock, it was still before 3 AM. There were just a few more details she wanted to include. She considered that maybe the reason her works were so criticized was because they looked so

flawless, the time wasn't visible. The effectiveness of her work in its shock value always overshadowed the diligence required to create them. The result was so good as to look effortless, when that couldn't be further from the truth. It was like in her Spring Sophomore gallery. The professors were so concerned about how she obtained the ashes of family pets, and if the last one was really her grandmother, that they couldn't even see the work those pieces required. It wasn't about whose ashes were whose, it was about what the viewer expects to be done with ashes, a statement about what the viewer holds sacred. It was about the artistry required to paint with revered family remains. But of course, they just called it "too shocking" and moved on.

Her portrait was just about complete. She merely needed to sign it and she could finally go to bed. Her whole arm felt cold. She was fighting to keep her eyes open, and the room seemed to fill with grey on its edges. She would just put the pen down for a second and rest her eyes, she thought. She could always sign it tomorrow and turn it in fresh. The room was getting darker and her portrait seemed further away. Her arms longer, her desk lower. She closed her eyes for just a second. Her alarm would wake her if she fell asleep. The art show is tomorrow.

Her head on her desk, blood continued to pulse from the nib of her pen. It formed a tiny circle on the page below that grew like a malignant tumor and spread through the paper. Each pulse a little smaller until after a while, they stopped completely. Intermittent drips settled on the page. Her paper was now nothing more than a red square. The whites between the lines were filled. Daisy's alarm sounded, but she did not raise to quiet it.

THE ART SHOW IS TODAY. The exhibition hall was abuzz with the padding footsteps of professors, parents and siblings, the odd gallery owner, there more out of morbid curiosity than anything, and crowds of freshman forced to attend. The latter group there to write a critique of three students' pieces, a report worth 25% of their grade. Two points extra credit for each additional piece, capped at a max of 6.

"You ever notice that you can tell how important someone is by how they walk through an exhibition?" Alex asked the girl next to him. She didn't respond. "It's like a contest to see who can walk the slowest and take the most time looking at each thing." He continued, still to no response. "But you can't just look at everything for a long time, or people will think you're too easily impressed, you know? Like, you have to just breeze past a few unlucky kids' work. You have to quietly let them know it's shit because otherwise you're a philistine. Watch."

He pointed to one of the more rotund and, consequently, sweatier men milling about the room. The man rubbed the little protrusion of chin that jutted roundly from his jowl and stared intently at a painting of seemingly random colors with a tear across its bottom half. He adjusted his glasses and looked a little closer at something indiscernible in the top corner. Then he wrote something down and walked away. As he walked, he gripped his left wrist behind his back and held his clipboard behind him. He sauntered past two other students, risking hardly a glimpse at their near identical abstract paintings.

"See what I mean?" said Alex. "That guy's clearly a big baller, right?" The girl next to him shrugged. He gave up. He would never get a girl's number at one of these things. Maybe she didn't like his painting. When he first woke up this morning, he was worried he wouldn't even have one, but things like this just seemed to work out for him. He must have been working on this for months, but he had no memory of doing so. But working blackout drunk always gave him superheroic situational memory. At least he assumed it did. He was an awful artist sober, but when paintings appeared—and his name was on them so he must have done them himself—they were always gorgeous.

Behind him, a menacingly large canvas consumed the wall. It was painted in that vaguely cartoonish, vaguely realistic style. He would never say it himself, but it looked right out of Picasso's blue-period. It depicted an enormous head rendered monochromatic in shades of blue. The face was unfamiliar to him. It was old and looked into the distance. Though there was no overt indication of this, something about its eyes suggested a pure horror within. It almost looked like it was seeing something just behind the viewer but couldn't warn them. Pushing out against the skull like a sheet of rubber was the shape of a man, trapped within, straining to get out. In blurry indigo, shadows defined the face within as it, jutted through the skin, revealing a scream of horror. This figure was trying to escape the man's skull; arms pushed like tendrils out past the old man's ears. The painting horrified him, and not just because it appeared that morning leaned against his wall—that was pretty normal, actually. It

terrified him for some deeper, more personal reason he couldn't quite place. He tried not to look at it. Even on the way here, as he carried the painting under his arm, he flipped it around, so the painted side faced his leg. He didn't want to force campus pedestrians into viewing it.

The deep blues and indigos that carved wrinkles into the man's head blurred into the background, creating a wall of navy and near-black. The obscured face of the figure within had a scream of abject horror that he—and later, judges would also comment—could all but hear as he viewed it. He really didn't like looking at it. It felt like he was falling in.

"It's time to announce the awards" said someone over the P.A. "Please return to your paintings. Judges will present the winners with their awards."

Finally, Alex thought. He took a quick sip out of his "water" bottle. Clear liquor was great because you didn't have to store it in an opaque container. It probably did seem a little odd how rarely he drank it and in such small quantities, but no one ever asked. Likely, no one ever noticed. He took another sip to calm his nerves, and watched the slowest moving men, trying to figure out which one was a judge. He placed the bottle back in his bag and resumed ringing his hands and tapping his foot. He and the girl beside him waited in silence.

Brian stood, rocking back and forth on his feet ever so slightly, a nervous habit from high school public speaking classes that he never quite shook. He really wanted a cigarette. Last night, there was no time to fix his painting; he didn't even try. Instead, he just went to bed and got his usual five hours of restive sleep.

He stood, fidgeting in front of his ruined still life. Two, perfect, photorealistic peaches on either side of a smear of paint. Little rivers of dry paint dripped off the splatter in the center; the base of the canvas covered in stalactites of now hardened drops of paint, frozen in time. Like the peaches, his peers flanked his blighted painting on both sides with their own dross still lifes.

On his left was a rather poorly rendered bowl of pears sitting in a grassy field. The painted shadows went in two different directions so, either he unintentionally outed himself as working off of a photo taken in his kitchen (where light sources are closer to the subject and more varied, therefore such paradoxical shadows are actually possible), or more likely, he was just a terrible painter. On his right, a girl with more tattoo than skin stood by a painting of a bowl filled with various fruits. Each fruit was phallic—bananas, cucumbers, gourds, cassava, you get the idea—but with a large, unsettlingly vaginal gash ripped down each of them. It seemed like an interesting idea, at least if he was understanding the metaphor, but she clearly had no mastery of oils. It was blotchy, and colors were muddied. It looked like a rough draft; maybe it was too impressionist? But this was for a realist class. Both of his neighbors' paintings looked like they were finished in less than a week with no real effort. But then, his was no better—all of his effort coated in a blob of instant intensity. Any evidence of the time put into it was buried under a wall of dripping paint. He could criticize others' paintings as much as he wanted, but it didn't change the fact that his painting was stained. At least they followed the rubric. He really wanted a cigarette, or for the judges to just end this thing already.

"Hey, have you seen Daisy?" David asked Eric. Both of their paintings were categorized as "other" by the volunteer judge at the door, so they stood toward the back of the hall with the other "other"s. To David's right, two anodyne abstract-expressionist pieces. They elicited very little within him, but he appreciated the color combinations used in the second one down. Eric was to his left.

"No," he replied. "But I would have assumed whatever she did would be back here with us." He motioned to the various oddball paintings, sculptures, and unclassifiable installation pieces.

"Maybe she overslept?" said David.

"I'd be surprised. She said she was planning something big for the show. Something that would 'blow our minds'."

"So, another used tampon sculpture? With materials collected and added to it all year?" They both laughed.

"No, she's probably around here somewhere. Probably with the mixed media people around the corner."

"No, I'm afraid she was absent," said Professor Brombakas as he emerged from the crowd in front of them. "It appears she won't be graduating, but I suppose it doesn't really matter," he said this in a dreamy, distant way. "I've never had a student not attend their final gallery unless they plan to drop out."

"Oh man," said David. "You really think she will?"

"You didn't hear it from me," he replied. "It's probably for the best, really. She just didn't grasp what it takes to be... well frankly, to be good. She was so obsessed with the idea that great art and great effort put into art were the same. I'm sorry, I really shouldn't comment." He let out something between a chuckle and a cough and wiped his forehead with a pocket square. "Please don't repeat that," he said. "I could get in trouble."

"Of course," said David. Eric was silent, and slowly shifted to hide his piece from view. Brombakas wasn't in it, but his colleagues were. He wasn't sure if he'd be upset not to be included, or upset that his friends were, and it seemed better not to risk his best faculty relationship on the last day of school.

"Now," Brombakas said, "I'm here to say congratulations! David, you won the award for excellence in expressionism!" He removed a blue ribbon held in his clipboard. David's face lit up.

"David, I was so happy the others agreed with me; we all saw the passion in your work," he said. "The rage, the sheer rage! And my god, the sadness. The depths of your soul you must have plumbed for this. I've never had a piece move me the way yours did, my goodness."

Eric looked at the blue-brown canvas. It was covered in a few bright greens and reds and had a tear across the bottom. It looked nice he supposed, but he didn't see any rage. He inspected it a while longer and couldn't find the sadness either. Abstract expressionists can say their paintings are anything.

"Well I had a great teacher," said David, accepting the ribbon. He tried not to smile, to be stoic about it, but it kept breaking through. "I really had a great semester, professor. Thank you so much."

They continued chatting in this way, and Eric was happy for David—if a little confused. He supposed abstract stuff was just over his head, like a Zen koan or something, and he was just looking at it wrong. Maybe if he stared long enough it would reveal itself. But before he could decipher whatever cryptic meaning was wrapped up in David's painting, someone tapped his shoulder.

"Eric." He knew that voice. "we talked about this." Professor Hurley stood behind him, his face blood red, hands balled into fists. He was staring directly at his depiction in the polyptych. Could Eric follow his gaze with more precision, it would be clear his scrutiny was directed entirely on the depiction of his own penis, or the lack thereof. His hands were shaking as his eyes followed Dr. Abernathy's painted tendrils. His eyes grew wider the longer he stared. "I thought we agreed," he said, his voice strained. "You cannot depict acts of penetration." A blood vessel in his neck strained almost an inch out.

"Darron," Professor Brombakas said. Professor Hurley snapped his head toward his. Eric was pretty sure if he hadn't stopped looking, a vessel in his eye would have popped. "Come on now, of all places, we aren't in the business of censorship. Look at how detailed—"

"This is unacceptable!" Professor Hurley said. He turned back to Eric as he said this. "I'm taking this to Dr. Abernathy's office, and I'll leave it for him to decide, but Eric, I will do everything within my power to see you expelled for this."

"Darron, be reasonable—"

"No! I asked Eric for just one thing! One freaking thing! I asked him not to depict penetration, and here, he's gone and done it. Seven times!"

It was actually a few more than that depending on one's definition of "penetration", but Eric didn't bother to correct him. He was too busy shaking and backing up. His hands were trembling and he couldn't will them to stop.

"Why didn't you just turn in what you showed in our in-class critique, Eric? How long have you been working on this monstrosity! You would have gotten an A, but no! You had to make some weird, heavy-handed political message. Just because you were mad at me?"

You're going to try and drag this whole department- no! The whole school down to your level? Are you so twisted you have to have sex in every one of your paintings? You're not graduating, I'll see to that. Even if you're not expelled, which you almost certainly will be, you're failing my class."

"Now hold on," said Brombakas. But again, he was cut off.

"I don't know what you thought would happen here today, if you thought we would all see your 'genius', or maybe think you're some sort of iconoclast. I don't care. This gets a zero. End of discussion." He ripped the drawing off of the easel and walked back into the crowd. Eric sat on the cold tile floor, back against the wall. At least his painting had meaning, he thought. At least he turned in something that mattered.

Brian's agitation continued to grow, but at least the judges were done handing out ribbons. To no one's surprise, he was not visited; though, the smudgy vaginal fruit painting was. An older, male judge gave it an award for its "daring take on traditional forms" and its "stunning bravery in the socio-economic climate" whatever that means. It was okay, but did they not see the smudges? Did they not see the amateur techniques she used? It wasn't intentional, it was incompetence! Of course, what could he really say, looking over from his ruined still life. A smudgy painting was better than a spoiled one. Across the hall he saw a kid next to David speaking with a professor. Likely he won best in show. By the grace of god this would end soon. Christ, he wanted a cigarette. He had spent most of the show trying to stand exactly in the middle of his painting, with the vague hope that passersby would only see the well-painted edges. Obviously, this pursuit was in vain.

The only time a judge came over for a quick inspection, Brian tried to block his view of the bleeding gash in the middle. As he inspected only the masterly edges, he put his sweaty head close enough to the painting that Brian was a little worried his glazed forehead would rub off into the work. The judge pulled his head back and walked to Brian's opposite side.

"Excuse me," he said, and attempted to look behind his back. Brian did not move. "I need to see the whole painting," he said.

"Could you please move?"

"What if I told you my blocking the painting was part of the artwork?" he said.

"I would say that makes it difficult to install elsewhere," he said. "Or to buy." Brian sighed and stepped sideways. The blight on his painting was revealed, and the judge audibly gasped. He put a hand to his mouth and stared for a moment with his eyebrows pressed close together, separated by only a few wrinkles of skin. Finally, he wrote something down and slowly shuffled off. He glanced at a few neighboring paintings but didn't stay long. He finally meandered off, his clipboard only containing notes on Brian's peaches. Brian was less than thrilled his failure was officially documented, but that was the nature of these things.

The only other time someone slipped through his defenses, it was someone's mother. He ducked down for just a split second to tie his shoes, but that was all the time it took for her to take a look and let him know that it was, "interesting, but I don't think I get it exactly. So, you painted the peaches, but then you splattered it with paint?"

He closed his eyes, still mid-kneel, and stood up slowly.

"Yup," he told her. "On the nose."

"Why?"

Brian just shrugged. His grade was contingent on his being here, but not on being nice to his peers' mothers.

"But what does it mean?" She said. "Like, why would you do that?"

"Why does anyone do anything?" He said. She looked puzzled.

"It looks so nice, but then it has the paint on it. I just don't understand why you--"

"It symbolizes sex," he said. That was enough to make her leave. It always was.

As far as he knew, those were the only two incidents his shame was noticed by anyone. No one really looks at art pieces—not in galleries. Maybe if someone has a single painting in their house, or

they see one in the lobby of a hotel or something they would bother to scrutinize it, but in the midst of all of this art, a glimpse was all anyone bothered. It's a paradox: the amount of time people will look at a painting is only ever a fraction of the time it took to create it. A thousand details go unnoticed every time someone breezes by, at least for Brian's work. Details just aren't important. The old adage about first impressions is true. Maybe he should just drop out, start over and get a "real" degree in engineering. At least there, attention to detail was considered a good thing.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and non-binary individuals," a voice over the P.A. announced. "As the art show is coming to a close, we would like to take this time to honor the artist who won this year's highly coveted 'Masterpiece' award. This prize is not given out every year, only when the full panel of judges agrees that a student warrants nomination. At which time, every staff member who has mentored the artist must unanimously agree that this student is deserving of such a prize. It is awarded for overall excellence in the student's field of study, but it also signifies that this student has grown in some fashion as an artist during their time here."

Just get it over with, Brian thought.

"Not only for excellence in his field, but for abjuring his old ways, for trying something radically new yet retaining his old style, for displaying true mastery, The Wallace School of Art and Design has selected 'Still Life of Three Peaches on a Table', by Brian Redis as this year's masterpiece."

"What?" Brian said. The vagina-fruit girl, and the bad shadow guy both looked at him excitedly and clapped. "Are you guys serious?" He said, a little louder than he intended. Professor Okter emerged from the crowd with an enormous blue ribbon.

"Brian, I knew you could do it!" he said. "I can tell you really took my words to heart."

"But the painting is ruined!" Brian said. It seemed like every person in the room was excitedly coming over to see the "masterpiece". The crowd behind Professor Okter grew, cameras flashed, the former murmur that permeated the room grew to a roar.

“What are you talking about?” Professor Okter said. “This is your greatest self-portrait yet! Your symbolic rejection of realism in the same medium, the symbolism of perfection, literally stepping aside to allow for emotion to rip through your painting. Brian it all read! I haven’t seen a painting so deserving of this award in longer than I can remember.”

Brian tried to respond, but he was drowned out by the clatter of shutters capturing the moment in photorealistic detail.

